PENNY PARKER MYSTERY STORIES

The VANISHING HOUSEBOAT

by MILDRED A. WIRT

PENNY PARKER MYSTERY STORIES

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MILDRED A. WIRT

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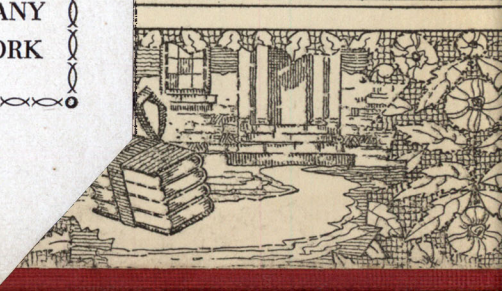

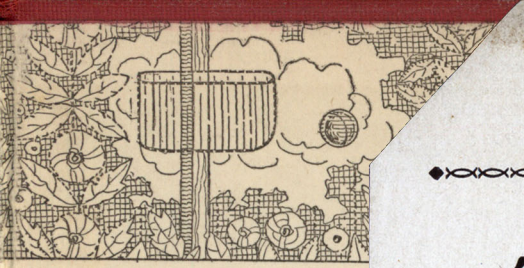

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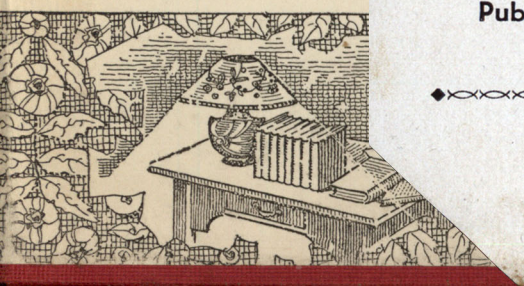

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2

THE VANISHING HOUSEBOAT

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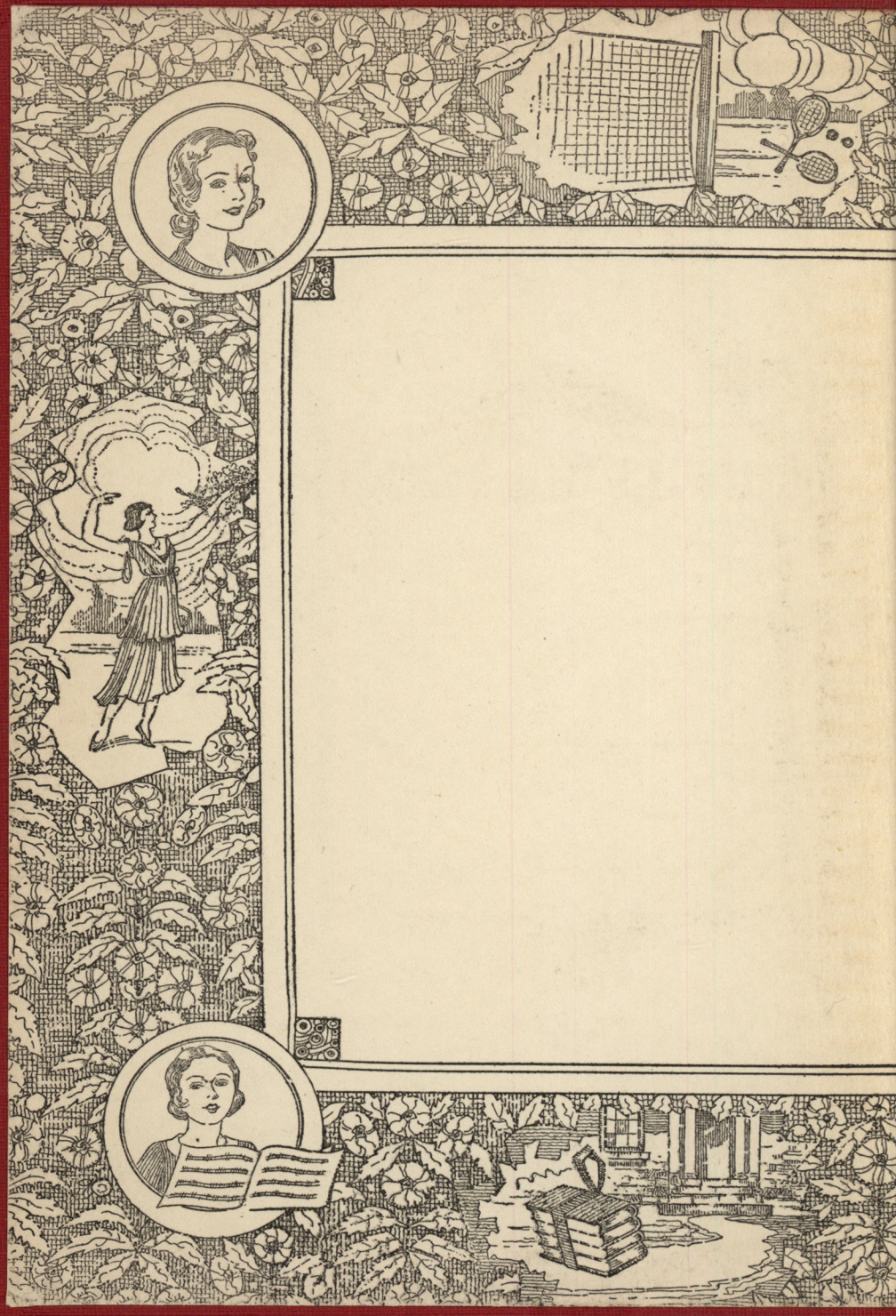
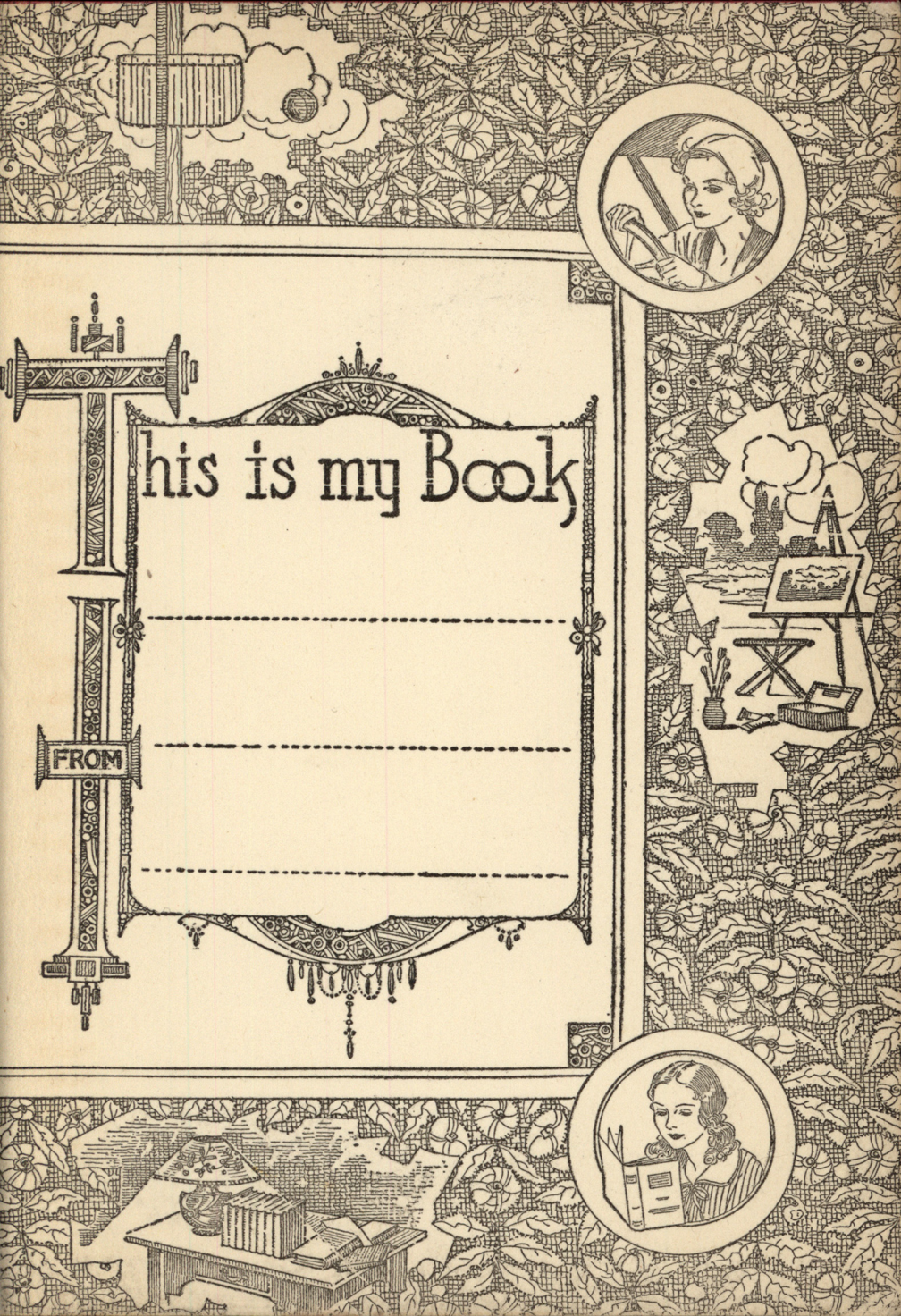
The VANISHING HOUSEBOAT

MILDRED A. WIRT




This is my Book
FROM

PENNY SWUNG HER BACK AND SHOULDERS HARD AGAINST THE GLASS.

"The Vanishing Houseboat"

(See page 190)

The Vanishing Houseboat

By

MILDRED A. WIRT

Author of

MILDRED A. WIRT MYSTERY STORIES
TRAILER STORIES FOR GIRLS

Illustrated

CUPPLES AND LEON COMPANY

Publishers

NEW YORK

PENNY PARKER

MYSTERY STORIES

Large 12 mo. *Cloth* *Illustrated*

TALE OF THE WITCH DOLL

THE VANISHING HOUSEBOAT

Other Titles in Preparation

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The Vanishing Houseboat

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CHAPTER

1

A SANDWICH AT RINI'S

"YOU KNOW, Lou, I've been doing a lot of wondering here of late," remarked Penny Parker to her chum, Louise Sidell.

The girls were riding in Penny's mud-splattered blue coupe, otherwise known as the Leaping Lena. At the moment Lena was bouncing more than usual for the pavement was bumpy in this section of Riverview.

"Wondering what?" inquired Louise, absently brushing a wisp of brown hair from her eyes.

"Wondering if maybe there isn't something wrong with me," Penny replied with a grin. "My appetite doesn't seem to be normal."

"Oh, why beat about the bush?" countered Louise. "Why not come right out and admit you're hungry again? Or maybe 'again' is the wrong word. I should have said 'yet.' "

"Well, I could do with a lunch. How about Rini's? We're close there now."

"Rini's would suit me," Louise nodded. "They have

perfectly gorgeous sandwiches. Ham and cheese, olives, lettuce and mayonnaise on a toasted bun—all for twenty cents."

"What, no mustard?" Penny laughed. "Well, that sounds good to me. Suppose we try it."

She guided the coupe into a rectangle of space by the curbing, and ruefully dropped a nickle into the parking meter.

"If we're not back here before that old machine clocks off an hour, I'll get a parking ticket," she warned her chum as they started toward Rini's Cafe. "We'll have to work fast on those sandwiches."

"Oh, your father knows all the policemen in town," Louise said carelessly. "He could get the ticket fixed."

"He could, but he wouldn't. You don't know Dad, Louise."

Penny liked to believe that her father, Anthony B. Parker, editor and publisher of the *Riverview Star*, ruled his only daughter with a hand of iron. Actually, he was very indulgent, and made few rules, but those few he expected to be obeyed. One of his pet rulings was that Penny must live within her weekly allowance, and this she found trying, for Leaping Lena had a persistent habit of running up expensive repair bills.

The girls entered Rini's which at the hour of three was quite deserted. They sought a booth at the rear of the room and waited for a waitress to bring them a menu.

Complacently, Louise studied her reflection in the

mirror. She had dark brown eyes, and a slightly plump, oval face. In contrast, Penny was an outright blond, with curls combed back over her shapely ears, bringing well-molded features into prominence. Both girls were dressed very much alike, in white blouses and dark skirts.

A waitress in a neat, starched green uniform, arrived with water glasses and the menu cards. Penny glanced up in astonishment for she recognized the girl.

"Why, Laura Blair!" she exclaimed. "I didn't know you worked here."

"I've only had the job a week," the waitress admitted, speaking in low tones so the proprietor would not hear.

Penny studied Laura with interest, reflecting that in the year since the girl had left Riverview High School, she had grown thinner and much older looking. It was plain that things had been going none too well with Laura, otherwise she would not be working as a waitress at Rini's.

"How do you like it here?" Louise questioned curiously.

Laura glanced again toward the front of the cafe before she answered in a bitter tone:

"I hate it! Mr. Rini works me every instant of the time, and he's always berating me for mistakes."

"Then why don't you leave?" asked Penny. "Couldn't you find other work?"

"I doubt it. I tried everywhere before I accepted this

position. It seems no one wishes to hire an inexperienced person these days. I should have taken more practical subjects in school."

"You're living with your parents, I suppose?" remarked Louise.

Laura gave her a queer, strained look. "Didn't you know?" she asked quietly. "My parents were killed in an auto accident just a month after I left Riverview High."

"Oh, I'm so sorry," Louise murmured. "We hadn't heard, Laura."

"Father always was so careless in his driving. I guess the accident was his fault. I—I can't tell you about it now. Mr. Rini is watching. Your orders please?"

"A number three special with hot chocolate," Louise said automatically, while Penny added: "Make mine the same."

Laura nodded and went quickly through the swinging doors to the kitchen.

"No wonder she seems so changed," Louise said, staring at Penny across the table. The news regarding Laura's parents had shocked them both.

"If the accident was her father's fault, I suppose not a cent of compensation was paid," Penny commented. "Poor Laura!"

"And I've always heard this was a hard place to work. I don't think Laura is strong enough to be a waitress."

"No, she's delicate." Penny frowned, and studied the pattern of the inlaid table.

Presently, Laura returned from the kitchen, bearing a tray of sandwiches and chocolate. She handled her burden awkwardly, and the girls saw Mr. Rini watching disapprovingly from behind the soda fountain. While the girl was easing the tray on a nearby table, he came toward her, saying in a curt tone:

"Try to work with more speed, Miss Blair. Our customers expect quick service."

"Yes, Mr. Rini," murmured Laura.

She placed a cup of chocolate at Penny's elbow but nervously set it too close to the edge of the table. A moment later, in reaching across to deposit the plate of sandwiches, her arm brushed against it. Penny saw the cup sliding, and tried to rescue it, but in vain.

The cup of steaming liquid crashed to the floor, splattering Laura's shoes and uniform. She was not burned but the chinaware smashed into a dozen pieces.

Mr. Rini descended upon the horror-stricken girl.

"You've broken another dish," he said in a quiet but cutting tone. "The second this week."

"I—I'm terribly sorry—" Laura stammered.

"It really was my fault, I think," Penny said, determined to take the blame. "My hand probably brushed against the cup."

"I saw exactly what happened," Mr. Rini replied. "Miss Blair, clean up this mess. The cashier will settle with you."

"You're discharging me?" the girl gasped. "Oh, Mr. Rini—"

"You are through here," the man repeated coldly. "And don't ask me for a recommendation."

Laura turned and went slowly to the kitchen. When she came back a moment later with a cloth to wipe up the spilled chocolate, her face was very white.

"Don't you worry, Laura," Louise whispered encouragingly. "You'll find a better job. Mr. Rini is an old slave driver anyway!"

The girl did not reply. She kept her head bent low as she mopped at the floor.

"Laura," said Penny, "how long will it take you to change your uniform?"

"About five minutes."

"Then meet us outside as soon as you're ready to leave. Louise and I would like to talk with you."

Laura nodded and returned once more to the kitchen. A minute later Mr. Rini brought Penny a fresh cup of chocolate.

"I am sorry you have been annoyed," he apologized in a purring voice. "Is everything quite satisfactory now?"

"No, it isn't, Mr. Rini," Penny returned bluntly. "I don't care for the flavor of your chocolate. In fact, I don't care for the flavor of anything about this place!"

Having delivered this impertinence, she clinked a fifty cent piece down on the table, arose, and walked out of the cafe. Louise hastily followed, but once out-

side the building she remonstrated with her chum.

"We might at least have eaten the food since we paid for it."

"I'd starve before I'd touch anything at that place, Lou. I'll never set foot in there again—not after the way he acted."

The girls returned to the coupe, there to await the arrival of Laura. Soon she emerged from the cafe, wearing a coat and hat, and carrying a paper bundle under her arm. Louise made room for her in the front seat.

"It was kind of you to wait," Laura said in a discouraged voice.

"May we take you home?" Penny inquired, starting the car.

Laura said that she lived at a rooming house on Bancroft Street, and Penny turned the car in that direction. As they threaded through the dense traffic, no one spoke. At last Louise broke the silence.

"Have you any idea what you'll do, Laura?"

"I'll try for another job. If I don't get one then I may starve."

"Oh, surely it's not that serious," said Penny.

"Well, not quite. I have about twenty dollars saved. And if the worst came, I could go to Chicago and live with a cousin—if she'd take me. But Ellen has four children, and can't afford to help me."

"Maybe Dad could use you at the newspaper office," Penny said thoughtfully. "Can you run a typewriter?"

Laura shook her head.

"It's more than kind of you, Penny, but we both know I am not trained for newspaper work."

"Perhaps you could find a position as companion to someone," suggested Louise helpfully. "You've studied French and music."

"I'd like such a job," said Laura, smiling. "Unfortunately, I can't locate any. I do know of a place where I might find housework."

She opened her purse and withdrew a clipping torn from the morning edition of the *Riverview Star*.

"This sounds fairly good," she remarked, reading the advertisement aloud.

"Wanted—girl for general housework. Board, room, five dollars. Apply at Old Mansion, White Falls."

"The pay isn't very high," Penny remarked.

"No, but with my room and board, I'd not have many expenses. However, I can't apply for the place because the bus doesn't run down that way."

"Mine does," Penny smiled. "I'll take you to White Falls if you wish, Laura."

"Oh, I'd be so grateful."

"Could you be ready in fifteen minutes?" Penny asked, glancing at her wristwatch.

"Yes, it won't take me long to pack my suitcase."

"That will just give Lou and me time to tell our folks where we are going," Penny declared.

She dropped Laura off at her rooming house on Bancroft, promising to return for her in a very few

minutes. She then drove Louise home, and upon gaining Mrs. Sidell's consent to the trip, telephoned her father at the *Star* office.

"Go right along," Mr. Parker assured her. "What time will you get back from White Falls?"

"Probably not until after dark," Penny returned. "Please let Mrs. Weems know I'll not be home for dinner, Dad."

Mrs. Weems, the family housekeeper, had cared for the girl since the death of Penelope's mother, many years before.

"I'll tell her," Mr. Parker promised. "Drive carefully, Penny."

Returning to Bancroft Street, the girls found Laura waiting on the front porch with her suitcase. The luggage was stowed in the rear of the coupe, and they drove out the south road which led through fifteen miles of rolling country to the town of White Falls, located on the Kobalt River.

During the ride, Laura was by turns talkative and morose. Finding the girls sympathetic listeners, she told them of her difficulties since graduating from school. Her parents had left her with more debts than money, and after the estate had been settled, nothing was left. She had worked in a ten cent store and in a cafeteria, but neither position had proven satisfactory.

"I haven't been very lucky," she declared. "It wouldn't surprise me a bit if this housekeeping job is gone before we get to White Falls."

"We'll hope not," Penny said cheerfully.

Secretly she was alarmed for fear they might be delayed by a rain storm. Angry looking clouds were scudding like sailboats across the sky. Presently she called Louise's attention to them.

"Oh, the sun is shining," her chum answered carelessly. "It won't rain for hours."

However, before they had covered two-thirds of the distance to White Falls, the gathering clouds blotted out the last patch of blue. The air cooled rapidly so that Louise rolled up the car windows to protect them from the chill wind. It was rapidly growing darker, and now and then a vivid flash of lightning crackled across the sky.

"How fast the storm is rolling up," Laura observed nervously. "Will we reach White Falls before it breaks?"

"Not a chance," said Penny. "The rain is coming now."

From the direction of the Kobalt river they could see a great white sheet sweeping nearer and nearer. A few drops of rain splattered the windshield, and then a deluge descended. The pavement became a lake, and Penny could not see many feet beyond the headlights.

"This is a regular cloudburst!" she gasped.

"Maybe we should pull up under a tree," Louise suggested anxiously. "You're apt to run off the road."

"If I stop and shut off the motor, the engine wires may get so wet from this driving rain, that we won't be

able to get it started again until the storm is over. I believe it's better to keep going."

Before the coupe had traveled very much farther, it became apparent to Penny that her decision had been unwise. The rain was coming down harder every instant. A coughing gasp from the engine warned her that the motor might die at any moment, leaving them stranded in the middle of the road.

"We'll have to pull up somewhere," she admitted.

"I see a building just ahead," Louise cried, peering through the rain-splattered glass. "It looks like a shed."

"And the door is open, or rather there isn't any door!" Penny exclaimed. "A welcome port in a storm!"

Without noticing that smoke issued from the rear of the building, she turned the car and drove into the shed.

CHAPTER

2

SHELTER FROM THE STORM

AS THE car rolled into the building, the girls were startled to hear the loud squawking of a flock of frightened chickens. Too late they saw that they had driven not into an empty shed, but into one which was very much occupied.

A small pig had been penned in one portion of the room, and tethered to a post was a once-white goat. Three small children in soiled overalls cowered against the wall, one crying in terror at this surprising intrusion of the blue coupe.

A woman in a long, faded calico dress had been cooking a stew at the oil stove. With spoon in hand, she stared open-mouthed at the girls, while her husband, unshaven, straw hat set back on his head at a rakish angle, slowly came toward the car.

"Mercy!" Louise exclaimed under her breath. "Imagine a family living in a place like this!"

Retreat was out of the question for the engine of the Leaping Lena had "gone dead" and Penny knew with-

out trying that it would not start again until the spark plugs had thoroughly dried.

"I surely am sorry to have driven right into your home," she apologized as the man came over to the running board. "We never dreamed anyone was living here."

The ill-kempt man gazed at her quizzically, and a half-apologetic grin spread over his face as he replied in a drawl:

"This ain't really our home. We've just been squattin' here since we lost our boat."

"Well, at least you have a roof over your head," Penny replied. "And that's not to be sneezed at in a rain like this."

The storm gave point to her words as the wind whipped around the building, making it creak in every one of its ancient joints.

"It's a right smart downpour," the man acknowledged casually. "Won't you ladies git down and make yourselves to home? Though I reckon them cushions feel softer than anywheres we got to set."

Penny assured him they would be very glad to accept his hospitality, and the three girls climbed from the coupe, soon to be confronted by the entire Gates family.

There was Ma Gates, from behind whose wide skirts the heads of two little Gates peered fearsomely: Jed, who might have been ten or twelve; and old Joe Gates,

the father, variously known as "Rusty Gates," and "Mud-Cat Joe."

"We're river people," the man informed. "And we're plumb off of our beat a-livin' in a cow barn. We ain't naturally that kind of folks."

"But what happened?" Penny asked. "Where did you formerly live?"

"On the old Kobalt," Mud-Cat Joe replied, jerking a scrawny finger toward the rear of the shed. "The river runs right along back of this building."

"Did you work on the Kobalt?" Penny inquired.

"Work?" Joe repeated. "No ma'am, we *lived* on the river."

"In a houseboat, but we think some bad men stole it." This latter contribution came from Jed, the oldest boy who now ventured forth.

"Yep, Jed is right," his father said. "We had the slickest little shanty boat that ever stuck on a sandbar. We tied her to the bank over thar to do some tradin'. When we got back all we had left was the raft. Someone had cut the rope and gone off down river with our boat. So we moved in here—us and the pigs and chickens."

"Pigs on a houseboat!" Louise said, unable to hide her astonishment. "I never heard of that before."

"Oh, us river folks all have pigs. That is all except them that's too shiftless and ornery to put up with 'em. But we packed 'em around on the raft, not right in where we lived."

"But how do you live in a place like this?" Penny insisted. "Why, there isn't even a place to cook."

"That's where you're wrong," Mud-Cat Joe said proudly. "Jennie, show 'em your cookin' truck."

Mrs. Gates led the way to the back of the shed, pointing to a rusty old iron cook stove whose pipe protruded from a large hole in the low roof.

"She draws like a house afire," Joe announced. "Ain't it so, Jennie?"

"It ain't bad!" Jennie said, in a speech which was long for her.

"Jennie is the best corn pone baker on the river," Joe added. "And her cat fish! She bakes 'em so they'd melt in a man's mouth."

"When we kin get 'em," Jennie remarked.

"We ain't had much vittles since the River Queen was stole," Mud-Cat Joe said ruefully. "You can't ketch many fish from the shore, and the hens don't lay good when they ain't on the river."

"And the kids is nigh naked," Jennie added, her face troubled.

"Yep, their clothes was all on the boat," Joe agreed. "Times is bad, but I allows I'll build up another boat right soon if the skunks that took the Queen don't bring 'er back. There's right smart timber in this here shed."

As Mud-Cat Joe spoke he ran an appraising eye over the dilapidated shelter above his head. Today it was only a shed. Tomorrow it might be a brand new shanty

boat, housing in comparative comfort, Jennie and Joe and their little brood.

Louise and Laura watched for a chance to excuse themselves and climbed back into the coupe, waiting for the rain to cease. Penny preferred to talk with Jed and the two smaller children, Petey and Susie. She noted the articles of clothing which they needed, and made up her mind that she would try to find suitable garments for them after she returned home.

Mud-Cat Joe proudly offered her the one good chair in the room, which he explained had "come floatin' down the river" only that morning. He chatted at great length about the River Queen, telling how he had searched everywhere along the shore for the missing houseboat but had been unable to find a trace of it.

"What does your boat look like?" Penny inquired curiously.

"Oh, there ain't another like her," Mud-Cat Joe answered. "She looks like a purty little box a settin' on a raft. She has a smoke pipe a comin' out of her middle that's painted green and her sides is covered with tar paper. Inside she has two rooms—the settin' and sleepin' room, and the eatin' room. The settin' room is papered real purty with sheets we took out of a mail order book."

"There was petunias growin' in a box on the porch," added Jennie.

"That boat sure was a daisy," Mud-Cat Joe sighed. "Best on the river, but she's done vanished."

In a short while the sun peeped out between two skudding thunderheads; the rain fell in fitful splashes and finally stopped altogether. The girls decided to continue their journey.

Penny stepped on the starter and gave a sigh of relief when Leaping Lena decided to run. The Gates family gathered around the coupe to bid the girls goodbye.

"Thank you for giving us shelter," Penny said to Mud-Cat Joe.

"You're right welcome, Miss. Where you all goin' now?"

"Down to White Falls, if the car is willing. Is it far from here?"

"Two miles by the river. Reckon it's quite a spell farther the way you're goin'."

As Penny was starting to shift gears, Mud-Cat thought of something more he wished to say. He crowded close, shouting above the roar of the engine:

"Say, if you see anything that looks like the River Queen down that way, I'll be obliged if you'll let me know. We need that boat mighty bad."

"We'll keep an eye out for it," Penny promised.

With the Gates family waving goodbye, she backed from the shed to the road. The pavement was wet and slippery, but already the sun had struggled through the clouds.

"Well, *that* was an experience!" exclaimed Louise, when they were well on their way toward White

Falls. "You do have a way of getting into the strangest places, Penny. Such as Osandra's seance parlor for example!"

"Osandra's seance parlor?" repeated Laura deeply puzzled.

"Oh, just one of Penny's many adventures," Louise chuckled. "Don't tell me you didn't read about it in the newspapers?"

"I'm afraid I didn't."

"Well, everyone else in Riverview and surrounding territory saw the account," Louise went on. "Penny had a signed story in the paper, entitled 'TALE OF THE WITCH DOLL,' which was played up on the front page."

"I must be dumb," Laura confessed. "I still don't understand."

"It's too long a story to tell in full detail," Louise replied. "Penny had a little spare time, so she went out and solved a mystery about a weird looking witch doll. I shiver yet when I think of it! Incidentally, she saved the life of the Great Osandra, and aided in the capture of an escaped convict."

"Don't forget the reward," Penny added. "I suppose you had no part in all the excitement, Lou?"

"Not worth mentioning. Say, why don't you devote your talents to Mud-Cat Joe's cause? He would appreciate it."

"You mean the vanished houseboat?" Penny in-

quired, slowing the car to avoid a hard bump. "Well, that's an idea! I can't understand how anyone would be so low as to steal from such poverty-stricken people."

"Oh, the boat may have just floated off down the river," Louise answered.

"Mud-Cat said the rope had been cut."

"That's so. Well, Penny, perhaps you can solve the mystery of what became of the vanished houseboat!"

"I'm afraid it doesn't interest me deeply," Penny replied. "I do mean to take the Gates family food and clothing. And they should have a better place to live. That old shed must be freezing cold at night."

By this time the girls had reached White Falls, a small town of perhaps a thousand inhabitants. Due to its location on the Kobalt river the community had once been prosperous, but now many old dwellings were deserted, and the entire place had a sleepy, "we've seen better days," appearance.

"Well, we're here," said Penny, parking the car in front of a restaurant at the edge of the business section. "I wonder where we'll find Old Mansion?"

"The advertisement gave no address," contributed Laura.

"I'll run into the cafe and inquire," Penny offered.

She returned in a moment but did not climb back into the car. "We stopped at the right place, girls. Old Mansion is next door."

"Next door!" Laura exclaimed, turning to stare at

the row of buildings. "You don't mean that old house jammed in between the cafe and a Chinese laundry!"

"I'm afraid that's the place all right."

"It's so run down," said Laura. "There's no yard, and the rear of the building borders directly on the river. How could they call it a mansion?"

"Someone did have plenty of imagination," Penny agreed. "But then, I judge the house has seen better days. That laundry, for instance, appears to have been built quite recently."

"I wouldn't apply for the position if I were you, Laura," advised Louise.

"No," added Penny, "if you don't care for the look of it, we'll simply drive back."

Laura stared again at the shabby wooden building whose sagging porch fronted the street, and after an obvious struggle with herself, announced determinedly:

"No, it's probably all right inside. Anyway, I'm desperate for a job. If the place is still open, I'll take it!"

She stepped from the car and started toward the house, walking slightly ahead of her friends.

"Wait a moment, Louise," Penny said quietly. "I have to lock the car."

She fumbled with the key, and then, when Laura was beyond hearing, said in an undertone:

"Louise, I don't know what to do. There's something I should tell Laura, and yet I'm afraid it will upset her."

Louise glanced at her chum in astonishment.

"About Old Mansion?" she asked.

"Yes, a strange thing happened. When I asked the cafe owner to direct me to the place, he gave me the queerest look. 'The house is next door,' he said, 'but take my advice and *don't spend a night there!*' "

CHAPTER

3

A CAFE OWNER'S WARNING

"DIDN'T YOU ask the man what he meant?" Louise inquired, taken aback by Penny's disclosure.

"Certainly, I did, Lou. He merely shrugged, and said it was his opinion I'd not like the place."

"Then he meant nothing after all?"

"I'm not sure," Penny said slowly. "Perhaps he started to tell me something and changed his mind. Anyway, the question is, shall I tell Laura?"

"She'll never take the job if you do."

"That's what I figured. Of course, if the place is undesirable, we wouldn't wish her to have it."

"Why not wait until we learn the outcome of the interview?"

"Perhaps that would be wise," Penny agreed.

Laura had paused to wait for her friends, so the girls quickly overtook her.

"Shall we wait outside or go in with you?" Penny inquired.

"You don't mind coming along?" Laura asked timidly.

"Not in the least."

"Then I wish you would. I dread interviewing strangers."

The three girls let themselves through a dirty picket fence and made their way to the porch. A card in the front window bearing the words: "Tourist Rooms," caused Penny to remark that Laura would find plenty of work to do in a house which catered to transients.

Louise rang the door bell and in a moment, a lean woman with frowsy hair scorched from a curling iron, came to the door. She had a sharp, angular face and a large nose which drew attention away from her other imperfect features.

"Well?" she inquired, a note of impatience in her voice.

When Laura became confused and could not answer, Penny replied that they were there in response to an advertisement inserted in the *Riverview Star.*

"Come in," the woman invited, scrutinizing each of the girls in turn. "You're not from White Falls, are you?"

"No, we live in Riverview," Penny replied easily.

"I'd rather have a girl from somewhere besides White Falls," the woman announced. "But I warn you the work is hard. There's scrubbing and washing and ironing to do. You look rather young to me."

"Oh, I'm not applying for the position," Penny said hastily. "Laura Blair is the one who is interested. Your name is—"

"Mrs. Anna Comstock," replied the woman, turning to gaze at Laura. She frowned disapprovingly. "You're not very strong, are you?"

"I've never been afraid of hard work," faltered Laura.

"Well, I don't know," Mrs. Comstock said doubtfully.

"Laura has had considerable experience in cafeterias and restaurants," said Penny. "I am sure you will find her both capable and willing."

"I might take you on trial," the woman told Laura. "You'll start in at four dollars a week, board and room."

"But the advertisement said five dollars," Laura protested.

"Four dollars—take it or leave it. Later, if you're a hard worker, and know how to mind your business, maybe I can raise you to five."

Laura glanced despairingly at Louise and Penny, and ignoring their signals, said in a subdued voice:

"I guess I'll take it."

"Then get into your work clothes right away," ordered Mrs. Comstock briskly. "I'm in the middle of a big ironing. You can take over while I do my grocery buying."

Before Laura could reply, footsteps were heard in the hallway. A short, pudgy man with alert, darting eyes entered the parlor. He glanced sharply at the girls.

"Who are they, Anna?" he asked rudely.

"The new housemaid, and some of her friends," his wife replied.

"We'll help you bring in your luggage, Laura," Penny said quickly.

She and Louise carried the heavy suitcase to an upstairs room which Mrs. Comstock assigned Laura. It was a plainly furnished chamber with ugly wall paper and an uncomfortable bed.

"Laura, do you think you really wish to stay?" Penny inquired. "If I'm any judge of character, Mrs. Comstock will prove a hard taskmaster."

"Oh, I expect it. But I'll stick it out for a few weeks anyway."

Penny glanced at Louise, wondering again if she should tell Laura what the cafe owner had said about Old Mansion. Before she could speak, Mrs. Comstock's voice was heard from the foot of the stairway.

"Hurry and change your clothes, Miss Blair," she called. "I want you to get started at the ironing."

"I'll be right down," Laura promised.

She changed her shoes and dress, and then leaving Penny and Louise to unpack the suitcase for her, ran down to the kitchen.

"I believe we should wait around for an hour or so," declared Penny to her chum. "Laura may change her mind and decide to return with us."

"Yes," agreed Louise, "Mrs. Comstock is starting out like a slave driver. It looks as if poor Laura will not have much free time for herself."

"I didn't care for her husband either," Penny announced. "He acted so suspicious of us."

"Just his rude way, I imagine."

They had finished hanging Laura's garments in the closet, when Louise, who chanced to be near the window, noticed Mrs. Comstock going down the street, market basket on her arm. Feeling that the coast was clear, the two girls ran to the kitchen to talk with Laura.

They discovered her hard at work on a huge basket of ironing. The sink was filled to overflowing with dirty dishes.

"I know I'll never make good here," Laura said anxiously. "Mrs. Comstock expects me to finish the ironing, do the scrubbing and the dishes before supper time! I can't possibly get half of it done."

"I should think not!" exclaimed Penny indignantly. "Mrs. Comstock should employ an octopus, not a mere human being."

"There's the dusting to do too," Laura added.

"We'll help you," Louise declared. "I'll start in on the dishes. I wonder where Old Comstock keeps her soap chips?"

"Don't bother to look for them," advised Penny. "You might know a woman of her frugal character wouldn't squander money on soap."

She found a dust cloth in the cellarway and while Louise devoted herself to the dishes, began an energetic attack on the furniture. It was a tedious task, for the

large rooms were crowded with massive pieces, bric-a-brac, and upon each wall hung countless numbers of paintings and portraits in heavy frames.

"Good afternoon, General," clowned Penny, making a mock bow before the picture of an ancient warlord. "What a scowling old fellow you are! The Comstock temperament, no doubt. Would his generalship like to have his face wiped?"

As she dusted the paintings, it occurred to her to wonder how Mr. and Mrs. Comstock had chanced to have so many. If the portraits had been done by worthwhile artists, she knew they must represent a fairly large sum of money. Yet the Comstocks had not impressed her as persons interested in art. Doubtlessly, the pictures and the massive furniture had been handed down by more prosperous relatives.

Penny dusted the lower floor, and then went back to the kitchen where she wiped the dishes for Louise. Laura worked doggedly at the ironing but the pile of clothes in the basket melted slowly.

"I'll never get through before dinner time," she declared nervously, glancing at the clock. "Mrs. Comstock is due back here any minute."

"Why kill yourself trying?" demanded Penny. "The more I see of this place the less I like it."

"I'd like to make a good impression. But these clothes are so hard to iron. They are wrinkled and dry."

Laura reached upon the shelf above the ironing

board for a sprinkling glass which stood there. Her arm brushed against a bottle of blueing left uncorked by Mrs. Comstock.

Before Laura could prevent the disaster, the bottle upset and tumbled down on the ironing board. An ugly blue stain spread slowly over a white shirt.

"Oh, what have I done now!" Laura cried in dismay. "I've ruined one of Mr. Comstock's shirts! Now I'm certain to lose my job!"

CHAPTER

4

THE BLUE STAIN

WHILE PENNY ran for a cloth to wipe up the spot on the linoleum, Laura plunged the shirt into a pan of cold water under the spigot at the sink.

"Only part of the stain is coming out!" she wailed. "What shall I do?"

"Let it soak for awhile," Louise suggested helpfully.

"Perhaps Mrs. Comstock has some stain remover fluid in the house," Penny added.

She searched through the cupboards and the shelves by the cellarway, but could find nothing which would serve the purpose. Anxiously, the girls inspected the shirt.

"Well, it's not coming out," Laura said. "I may as well start packing my things."

"Mrs. Comstock might not say anything about it," Louise ventured.

"She'll say plenty," Laura replied grimly. "Oh, why must I be so awkward? It seems luck is just against me."

"I have an idea!" Penny cried unexpectedly. "Re-

member that Chinese laundry next door, Lou? We'll take the shirt over there and see if the laundryman can remove the stain!"

"You'll never get it back in time," Laura protested.

"Maybe we will," Penny insisted. "Anyway, there's nothing to lose by trying. You keep on with that stupid ironing, Laura, while Louise and I see what we can do. If Mrs. Comstock returns ahead of us, we'll try to smuggle the shirt into the basket without her seeing it."

Wrapping the stained garment in an old newspaper, the girls made their way to the laundry next door. It was a fairly new two-story building which stood so close to the mansion that at one point the walls actually seemed to touch. At the rear, a porch very similar to one built on the ancient house, extended close to the river, and at high water time, water easily could swish against the high supporting posts.

Penny and Louise entered the laundry, and waited for the proprietor to come from the back room. Sing Lee was a squatty little man with a yellow, mask-like face whose slippers made no sound as he padded toward them.

"Missee wish washee done?" he asked politely.

"We have something rather special here," Penny said, unwrapping the shirt. "Blueing was spilled on this garment. Can you remove the stain?"

The Chinaman peered at the shirt for a moment.

"Velly bad stain," he remarked. "But Sing Lee make

it come out. Missee come back tomollow maybe."

"Tomorrow!" Penny exclaimed. "Oh, this is a rush order. We'll have to have it right away. Say in fifteen minutes."

The Chinaman shook his head, and thrust the shirt back into her hand.

"You wouldn't need to iron it," she urged. "Just remove the stain for us. That shouldn't take long."

The laundryman hesitated. "Sing Lee washee blue-spot stain from shirt if Missee pay one dollah."

Penny was taken aback at this exorbitant demand, but she reluctantly agreed to the terms. Sing Lee vanished into the rear room and the girls sat down on a bench to wait.

"Ugly little fellow, isn't he?" Louise whispered. "I hope he does a good job on that shirt."

Penny had been surveying the room, staring with interest at an object which hung on the wall directly above the bench.

"Did you notice what you're sitting under, Lou?" she inquired.

Louise glanced up, and with a little cry of alarm, sprang to her feet. A heavy silver sword with an intricately molded handle and a wicked looking blade, had been suspended over her head.

"Oh, it won't bite you," Penny laughed.

"I might be decapitated if it should fall from its support!" Louise retorted. "You don't catch me sitting under that thing!"

She arose and remained standing until Sing Lee returned with the shirt. Inspecting it to make certain the stain had been removed, Penny gave the Chinaman the sum he had demanded.

"Missee no live in White Falls?" he inquired, pocketing the dollar bill.

"We're from Riverview," Penny explained. "Just at the moment we're staying next door."

"Maybe Missee stay at Old Mansion tonight?" Sing Lee asked softly.

"No, we're merely here with a friend," Penny answered shortly. She did not care to reply to so many personal questions.

The girls carried the shirt back to the house next door, taking care to enter the kitchen quietly. There was no sign of Mrs. Comstock, or for that matter, of Laura. The ironing had been stacked neatly on the kitchen table.

"I suppose she's working upstairs," Louise said. "I'll finish this shirt before Mrs. Comstock drops in on us."

She neatly pressed the garment, and folding it, laid it with the other shirts.

"There!" she declared in satisfaction. "Mrs. Comstock will have keen eyesight if she discovers anything wrong."

Scarcely were the words spoken when the girls were startled to hear a piercing scream from one of the upstairs rooms.

"That was Laura's voice!" Penny exclaimed.

They darted up the circular stairway two at a time, wondering what latest misfortune had come upon their friend. Laura's room was empty.

However, as Penny and Louise were looking about in bewilderment, the door of Room seven opened and the girl came out into the hall. Her face was white, the pupils of her eyes dilated with fear.

"Why, what is the matter, Laura?" asked Penny.

"That room—" Laura whispered. "Those paintings!"

Louise and Penny opened the door and glanced inside the room. It was a large chamber with a massive four-poster walnut bed, dresser, and the usual chairs. Heavy red draperies hung at the windows, one of which overlooked the river, directly beneath. On the east wall were four portraits done in oil and hung in massive gilt frames. The figures were very nearly life-size, the faces depressing.

"It is pretty awful," Penny said. "But what made you scream, Laura?"

"That painting on the wall," Laura whispered in awe. "The portrait of the man with the red velvet hat —I was dusting—"

She broke off suddenly as the girls heard a door slam downstairs.

"Mrs. Comstock!" Laura finished excitedly. "She mustn't find us here!"

Quickly, the girls fled from the room, closing the door after them. Laura busied herself dusting the stairway just as Mrs. Comstock appeared.

"Humph!" the woman commented. "I must say you've done better than I expected. Never mind the rest of the dusting. Get downstairs and start dinner."

"Yes, Mrs. Comstock," Laura replied.

Penny noticed that as the girl descended the stairs her hands were shaking, and she gripped the railing for support.

"I suppose we should be starting for home, Lou," Penny remarked. "We have a long drive ahead of us."

Laura halted and turned an appealing face toward her friends.

"Can't you wait just a little longer?" she pleaded.

Instantly divining that Laura needed their companionship and moral support, the girls generously agreed they would remain for a time. The decision seemed displeasing to Mrs. Comstock who obviously considered them as intruders in the house. However, she refrained from comment.

"Gus and I shall expect dinner promptly at six-thirty," she told Laura. "You'll find the makings of a hash in the ice chest. There are turnips to be cooked, and you might make a rice pudding for dessert."

Taking the evening paper, she disappeared into the parlor, and the three girls were left alone. They retired to the kitchen, carefully closing the door.

"She didn't even notice the shirt!" Laura exclaimed in relief.

"No," Penny agreed. "Sing Lee next door did a good job of removing the stain. But Laura, I think you should decide to return with us to Riverview."

"I'd like to," said Laura, sinking down in a chair. She appeared to waver, and then added determinedly. "No, I'll not be so silly—I'll stick it out even after what happened up there in Room seven."

"What did happen?" Penny asked quickly. "What did you start to tell us just as Mrs. Comstock appeared?"

"It sounds rather ridiculous now," Laura whispered. "Yet it's true—I swear it is!"

"Something about the paintings?" Penny urged.

"I was dusting the bed," Laura said in a low tone. "All the time I felt so uncomfortable—I can't explain the sensation."

"Yes," Penny nodded. "The room gave me the same feeling."

"Suddenly I glanced toward that painting—the man with the red velvet cap." Laura's voice dropped still lower, and she shivered. "His eyes were looking straight at me."

"And was that when you screamed?"

"No," replied Laura. "I cried out in terror when I saw those terrible eyes *move!*"

CHAPTER

5

A TERRIFYING PORTRAIT

PENNY AND Louise regarded their friend with undisguised skepticism. They understood that Laura was tired and nervous, and in her overwrought condition it would be easy to imagine she had seen the eyes of the painting actually move.

"I can tell you don't believe me," the girl said. "But it's true!"

"The bedroom was quite dark when you were there," Penny replied soothingly. "You probably were mistaken, Laura."

"Then I must be losing my mind! Those horrible eyes blinked and moved sideways in their sockets! I—I saw it!"

"Laura," said Louise firmly. "This is no place for you. Come on back to Riverview with us."

"No, I shall stay. Perhaps I did get excited." Laura averted her face, feeling that she had made herself appear ridiculous in the eyes of her friends.

"The paintings in this house are the most ghastly

things I've ever seen," Penny declared. "But I imagine one could get used to them after a few days. Laura, would it make you feel more comfortable if Louise and I stayed with you tonight?"

"Why, yes, of course, only I'd not ask you to do it. And Mrs. Comstock might object."

"We could pay for our room. Since she takes tourists I don't see why she should object to us. Louise, would your folks mind if you stayed?"

"I don't know. I'd have to telephone."

"So would I. But I'm certain Dad won't mind. Suppose we talk with Mrs. Comstock now."

The girls went toward the parlor, intending to speak with the mistress of the house. Hearing voices within, they hesitated upon the threshold. Mrs. Comstock, her back turned, was talking in a low, tense tone to her husband.

"I tell you I'll not send the girl away," she said angrily. "She's a good worker and I'm tuckered out trying to keep up this big place and take in tourists."

"It's dangerous to have anyone here, and you know it, Anna," the man retorted. "Do you want us to get into trouble?"

He broke off abruptly, having noticed Louise and Penny in the doorway. The girls apologized for the intrusion, and mentioned their wish to remain for the night. Mrs. Comstock frowned and started to refuse, but before she could speak, Penny interposed hastily:

"We expect to pay for our room, of course."

"What do you think, Gus?" the woman asked, turning to her husband.

"Might as well pick up a dollar or two wherever we can," he muttered. "I'll get the register and you girls better sign it like regular over-night guests. There's state regulations, you know. It will be two dollars in advance."

Penny paid the fee, for Louise had little money with her. In signing the register, she noticed that the last guest who had spent a night at the Old Mansion had been a man by the name of J. D. Merriman from Chicago, assigned to Room seven.

"Where's your luggage?" asked Mr. Comstock.

"We brought none with us," Louise explained. "You see, we had no thought of remaining."

"Well, I guess it will be all right, though we don't usually take folks without luggage," the man said. "I'll let you have Room seven!"

"No, Gus!" cried Mrs. Comstock sharply. "Not that room!"

Mr. Comstock glanced angrily at his wife.

"Room seven hasn't been dusted," the woman stammered. "Put them in number ten. They'll like that much better."

"Why can't we share Laura's room?" inquired Louise. "I'm sure she wouldn't mind."

"It would save bed linen," Mrs. Comstock agreed quickly.

Gus Comstock acted none too pleased with the

arrangement, but he refrained from further comment.

"Will you take dinner here?" Mrs. Comstock inquired. "That will be fifty cents apiece."

"No, we thought we'd go next door to the cafe," Penny replied, without consulting Louise.

The prospect of hash and rice pudding held no lure, and besides, she did not wish to make Laura extra work.

"Lem Vare keeps a mighty poor table," Mr. Comstock said disparagingly. "You won't like it in my opinion."

"Well, we'll see," responded Penny, unmoved.

Returning to the kitchen to tell Laura that the Comstocks had agreed they might remain, the girls found her toiling over the hot stove.

"I'm glad you have decided to stay," Laura declared. "Of course, you may share my room. I'll not feel so lonesome with company."

Leaving the girl to serve supper, Penny and Louise started toward the cafe which adjoined the mansion on the left. They paused for a moment to stare at the dark river which flowed in a swift, steady stream close to the door.

"I can't imagine who would lay out a street in such fashion," Louise remarked. "All these buildings are dangerously near the water."

"I imagine they were built farther back," Penny returned. "Probably the river has cut into the bank as the years went by."

"One of these days I imagine everything will topple into the water."

"It wouldn't be a very great loss," Penny replied. "As far as I'm concerned Mr. Gus Comstock and wife can be perched on the roof when Old Mansion swims off!"

"They are an unpleasant pair. Did you hear what they were saying, Penny, when we came into the parlor?"

"Yes, it puzzled me. Why should Mr. Comstock consider it dangerous for Laura to remain here? And he acted so queer about that room. I was tempted to insist upon sleeping there despite Mrs. Comstock's protests."

"I'm glad you didn't, Penny. I haven't any overpowering desire to spend a night with portraits which roll their eyes and cut capers."

"Oh, that part must be nonsense, Lou."

"Yes, Laura was excited," Louise agreed. "So many things happened to her today she didn't know what she was doing."

"Still, it's very strange Mrs. Comstock was so set against us having that room. She acted almost as if she were afraid of something."

"She said it hadn't been dusted."

"Oh, that was only an excuse, Lou. Mr. Comstock seemed to understand what his wife meant, for he let the matter drop. Another odd thing, you remember the cafe owner dropped a hint about the mansion. He

said to take his advice and not spend a night here."

"And we're planning to do just the opposite!" Louise exclaimed. "I had forgotten all about it."

"That was one reason why I especially wished to stay," Penny confessed with a chuckle. "Well, shall we have our supper and telephone home? Perhaps while we're in the cafe I can induce Lem Vare to elaborate upon his original warning."

The cafe was entirely deserted when the girls entered. They asked to use the telephone, and placed long distance calls to their homes in Riverview. Both girls received permission to spend the night at White Falls.

Penny noticed that the proprietor, Lem Vare, listened closely to the conversations, and as he served them a little later at one of the white tables, he commented upon their decision to remain at the mansion.

"So you decided to stay after all?" he inquired.

"Yes, it would take us a long while to drive back to Riverview tonight," Penny answered. "Don't you think we'll like the place?"

Lem Vare did not answer, but hastily went to the kitchen. Soon he reappeared, bearing a tray laden with food. Despite Gus Comstock's prediction, the dishes were tasty and well prepared.

The proprietor loitered nearby while the girls ate the food, and Penny saw him gazing at them with troubled eyes. Several times he seemed upon the verge of speaking.

Finally she said again, in a conversational tone: "So you don't think we'll like the mansion?"

The man came near the table, and lowered his voice.

"You wouldn't catch me staying there," he said. "Not on your life!"

"Why?" questioned Penny.

"Well," returned the proprietor significantly. "Something *might* happen. What room are you staying in?"

"I'm not certain," replied Penny, astonished by the question.

"Is it on the south side of the building?"

"No, on the street side."

"Then that's not so bad," the man said in relief. "You had me good and scared for a minute."

"Just what is wrong with the place?" demanded Louise impatiently. "Is it supposed to be haunted?"

"Nothing like that," the man muttered. "I shouldn't be telling you all this."

"If you feel we might be in any danger, it is your duty," said Penny quietly. "Has all this mystery anything to do with Room seven?"

The man gave her a quick, quizzical glance.

"That's it," he said. "I'll tell you—"

His voice trailed off, and he began to gather up the dishes on the table. Glancing toward the door, Penny and Louise saw that Gus Comstock had noiselessly entered the cafe, and was regarding Lem Vare with an expression of deep suspicion.

CHAPTER

6

ROOM SEVEN

THE CAFE proprietor hastily disappeared into the kitchen with a tray of dishes, and to the annoyance of Penny and Louise, Gus Comstock loitered near their table. He picked up a newspaper and pretended to read it, but they could see that he was covertly watching them.

"He deliberately trailed us over here," Louise whispered.

Penny nodded and did not risk making a reply, for she knew Gus' ears might be sharp. There was no question in her mind that the man had tried to discourage them from dining at the cafe, and failing, had followed to learn what transpired. His facial expression had disclosed his distrust of Lem Vare.

The girls tarried over their dinner as long as possible, but it soon became evident that Gus Comstock intended to out-stay them. Convinced they could hope to acquire no information from the cafe owner under such conditions, they paid their small bill and left.

As the screen door slammed behind them, they heard Gus' voice rising angrily.

"Up to your old tricks, eh Lem?" he demanded.

"I don't know what you're talking about," the other man returned.

"Oh, yes, you do. I heard what you were telling those girls. You're trying to ruin our tourist business—that's what you're doing."

"It ought to be ruined," retorted Lem.

"Let me tell you something," Gus snapped. "You tend to your own business and let me tend mine! Get me? If you don't—"

The girls did not catch the remainder of the threat, for the man's voice dropped to a lower tone. Turning, they walked slowly down toward the river.

"Well, we learned very little after all," Louise remarked in disappointment. "I wonder what Lem intended to tell us?"

"I mean to go back there when the coast is clear, and question him," Penny declared. "It's evident, Lem and Gus are enemies, but even so, it strikes me that something is decidedly wrong at Old Mansion. Otherwise, Gus wouldn't be so afraid of the cafe owner spreading gossip."

"All the mystery seems to center around Room seven."

"Yes," Penny nodded, "I'd like to take another glance at the place, but I suppose it's impossible. Mrs. Comstock will be on her guard."

"I feel uneasy about Laura remaining here under the circumstances."

"Oh, I don't imagine there is any cause for real alarm," returned Penny. "Anyway, we'll try to talk with Lem Vare before we leave tomorrow."

Cloaked by gathering dusk, the girls stood for a moment watching the dark, swirling waters of the Kobalt river. As a motor boat laboriously plied its way upstream, tiny wavelets pounded against the stone supports of the old mansion. Along the far shore they noticed several houseboats which had been tied up in sheltered coves.

"All houseboats look just about alike to me," Louise remarked. "I'd be unable to recognize Mud-Cat's property if it came floating right before my eyes."

"I fear Mud-Cat will never see his River Queen again," Penny replied. "A pity, too."

The evening air had grown cold, so the girls walked back to the mansion, entering by the kitchen door. They found Laura washing dishes, and immediately lent her a helping hand.

"I'm tired enough to drop," the girl confessed when the last pan had been scoured. "If you don't mind, I'll go to bed."

"Let's all turn in," suggested Louise. "There's nothing to do in this one-horse town anyway."

Laura's room contained a double bed and a narrow, lumpy couch. Penny generously chose the latter, and without asking Mrs. Comstock, found extra linen and

blankets in the hall closet. Laura loaned pajamas to her friends, and by nine o'clock lights were out.

Long after Louise and Laura were sleeping peacefully, Penny lay awake. She was unaccustomed to retiring at such an early hour, and besides, the couch was uncomfortable. She squirmed and twisted and could not adjust herself.

Presently the girl became aware of voices from another room. Mrs. Comstock was talking with her husband, and in the still house her tones carried clearly.

"I don't care if you don't like it, Gus," she declared. "Laura stays, and that's all there is to it! She's the best worker I've ever had. You know we can't get anyone here in White Falls."

"I've nothing against the girl," Gus answered in a gruff voice. "But I'm afraid she may learn things and talk. Already that old fool, Lem Vare, is trying to start trouble."

"What's he up to now?"

"Trying to tell the girl's friends about Room seven. But I closed him up before he spilled it."

"Gus, I'm afraid," the woman muttered. "We might get into real trouble—"

"Forget it," Gus ordered. "You always were the worryin' kind. Go to sleep now."

The voices died away, and the house again became quiet. Penny lay with eyes wide open, staring into the darkness. What deep mystery could be associated with

Room seven, the chamber of hideous paintings? She reflected upon Laura's declaration that the eyes of one of the portraits had moved. But upon the face of it, such a claim was ridiculous.

Presently, after determining that upon the morrow she would attempt to persuade Laura to give up her position, Penny rolled over and tried to sleep. She was just becoming drowsy when she was aroused again by a sound not unlike the creaking of a board.

Penny sat up and listened. There it was again!

This time, she felt certain the noise came from the opposite side of the hall. She tried to make herself believe it was nothing unusual, that any old house was likely to produce strange sounds, yet the feeling persisted—someone was walking about in Room seven!

Unable to endure the suspense, Penny rolled out of bed, and tiptoed to the door. She opened it and listened. Everything was still for a moment, and then she heard the creaking noise once more.

"There *is* someone in Room seven!" she thought.

Penny glanced back at the bed where Laura and Louise were sleeping. She considered waking them and decided against it.

Slipping into Laura's robe, she stole down the hall, pausing before Room seven. She listened again and hearing no movement within, cautiously twisted the knob.

The door swung back to reveal an empty room.

Moonlight streamed in through the windows, throwing a ghost-like pattern on the carpet, and across one of the paintings.

Penny shivered and drew Laura's robe more closely about her slender figure. Suddenly she experienced an uncomfortable feeling, *that she was not alone in the room.* Yet certainly her senses were tricking her. The bed chamber was quite empty.

Penny entered the room and turned to gaze at the portraits on the east wall. She could not see them clearly. Three of the pictures were heavily shrouded in darkness. A moonbeam shone full on the fourth painting, a likeness of the man in the red cap, and the flickering light made his face appear almost alive. The eyes were luminous, and it seemed to her that they were focused directly upon her.

Suddenly, for no reason she could understand, Penny was terrified. Gone was her desire to investigate the room; she felt only an urge to escape.

"There's *something* here," she thought nervously.

Penny backed slowly toward the door, her gaze still fastened on the painting. She failed to hear footsteps behind her. Then, with no warning, she was grasped firmly by the shoulders.

CHAPTER

7

A NIGHT ADVENTURE

PENNY GAVE a smothered little cry. She whirled around, ready to fight off her attacker, and then laughed shakily. The person who held her was Mrs. Comstock, looking ridiculous in an old fashioned high-neck nightgown, and curlers sticking from her head like porcupine needles.

"Oh, Mrs. Comstock!" Penny gasped. "I thought a big bad ghost had me that time for sure!"

"What are you doing in this room?" demanded the woman sternly.

"Why, I—that is—"

"Your room is across the hall," said Mrs. Comstock tartly, assuming that the girl had become confused in the darkness. "Do you walk in your sleep?"

"Well, not very often," Penny stammered. "I'm sorry I caused you so much annoyance. I'll run back to my room now."

Without giving the woman an opportunity to question her further, she quickly fled. Mrs. Comstock closed the door of Room seven and turned a key in the

lock. Then the house once more settled down for the night.

Penny was glad that Louise and Laura had slept through the disturbance. She had no intention of revealing to them what had happened. Now that she was in her bed, snuggled down under the covers, her fears seemed silly.

"I'm getting worse than Laura!" she accused herself. "No one was in that room, of course. And it was all imagination, thinking even for an instant that those eyes were looking at me!"

Chuckling because Mrs. Comstock had given her such an uncomfortable moment, Penny curled up and went to sleep. She did not awaken until early morning, when someone pounded on the door.

"Six o'clock," called Mrs. Comstock. "Time to get up, Laura."

Still in a sleep-dazed condition, Laura slipped out of bed and started dressing. She remained weary from her previous day's work, but offered no complaint.

"I suppose we may as well get up too," Penny sighed.

She washed her hands and face in ice cold water from a white porcelain pitcher, and combed her hair.

"Is one of my eyes out of place, or is it this cracked mirror?" she asked, turning to Laura.

"It's the mirror," the girl laughed.

"I couldn't be sure," said Penny. "After last night—"

"Laura!" interrupted a loud voice from the foot of the stairs. "Are you up?"

"Coming," answered Laura nervously.

She started for the door when Penny caught her by the hand.

"Laura," she said soberly. "This will be our last chance to talk. Won't you come home with me? I'm sure you'll never like this place."

"I know that," Laura agreed.

"Then come back to Riverview with me. You may stay at our house until you find work."

Laura shook her head.

"Thank you, Penny, but I can't impose upon you. I am determined to be self-supporting."

Releasing her friend's hand, Laura ran out of the room, hastening down the stairway to the kitchen. An hour later when Penny and Louise were ready to take their leave, she had only a moment to talk with them.

"I appreciate your help more than I can say," she declared. "And I'll miss you both terribly. This house will be a morgue."

"Louise and I will run down to see you now and then," Penny promised. "And remember this, if you should need us for any reason, don't hesitate to send word."

"I'll remember," Laura said.

Penny had made up her mind to talk with Lem Vare again, so the girls went next door for breakfast.

The man did not seem very glad to see them nor was he in a conversational mood. Perhaps suspecting their purpose in calling, he remained in the kitchen after serving them.

"I'll bring him out of his den," Penny declared.

Rapping on the table, she requested the man to bring her a second cup of coffee. He deposited it by her plate and started to retreat, but before he could escape, she said quickly:

"Oh, Mr. Vare, what was it you started to tell us yesterday? You remember—when Gus Comstock came in."

"Why, I don't recollect," the man responded evasively. "Don't recall I was goin' to tell you anything."

"Something about Old Mansion," Penny insisted. "Is it haunted?"

"No, nothing like that."

"Then what is all this mystery connected with Room seven?"

Lem Vare glanced quickly about to make certain no one was within distance of his voice. In a low tone he said:

"Gus won't like it, me telling you this, but I'll do it anyhow. Folks say a man disappeared in that house!"

"From Room seven?" Louise demanded in astonishment.

"Yes."

"How long ago was that?" inquired Penny.

"Not so long ago," Lem answered, glancing uneasily toward the door. "I oughtn't to have told you this. There's no proof, and Lem denies it's true. Accuses me of trying to ruin his tourist business."

"Who was the man?" asked Penny.

"Couldn't tell you. Just a tourist who stopped there for a night."

"How do you know he vanished?"

"I reckon I have eyes," Lem answered. "For two days a brown sedan stood out in front of the mansion, and then it disappeared. Never did see hide nor hair of the fellow who drove it there. When I'd ask Gus about it, he'd shut up tighter than a clam!"

"Haven't the police investigated?"

Lem shrugged. "No one's complained as far as I know. Anyway, there's no proof."

"What do you think became of the man?"

"How should I know?" demanded Lem. "Gus is an ugly one to mix with, and I figure on tendin' my own business. Don't let on I told you all this."

He seemed so anxious that Penny gave up the questioning. She was uncertain as to the truth of the story. While she did not doubt Lem's sincerity, she understood that he might have been mistaken. As he had intimated, it would be a serious matter to make accusations against the Comstocks, without definite proof that a man had disappeared from their home.

She voiced this opinion to Louise, after they had returned to the car.

"Yes, Lem dislikes Gus Comstock so heartily, his eyesight may have been sharpened," Louise agreed. "He may have imagined the whole thing."

"There's only one reason why I'd think differently," Penny said thoughtfully.

"And what is that?"

"The Comstocks have acted so queerly about Room seven."

"Perhaps that is because the townspeople have been talking."

"Possibly," admitted Penny. "Still, Gus has mentioned possible danger several times. He seems afraid to have Laura in the house for fear she will discover something. Last night after you were asleep I heard him talking with his wife again."

"What did he say?"

"Oh, nothing we didn't know. Simply that he's opposed to having Laura in the mansion."

"I wish she weren't staying."

"So do I, but she's determined. Well, I suppose we may as well get started toward home."

Penny drove the car through the business section of the hamlet, and then suddenly applied the brakes.

"Now what?" demanded Louise in alarm.

"I've just had a splendid idea!" Penny cried. "We'll pass Mud-Cat Joe's place on our way home. Why not buy a basket of food and some clothing for the children? We could drop it off without taking very much time."

"It would be appreciated, I'm sure," Louise acknowledged.

The town boasted only one grocery store which the girls could locate. They bought a large basket of food, added a sack of candy for the children, stockings, overalls, and several items of underwear.

"I don't dare spend any more," Penny said. "We might have car trouble on the way home, and I'd be flat broke."

When the proprietor carried the basket to the automobile, she sought to draw him into conversation, mentioning casually that a friend of hers had taken work at Old Mansion. The store keeper gave her a quick, penetrating glance, but offered no comment. He deposited the groceries, and returned to his waiting customers.

Before Penny could remark upon his manner, Louise nudged her elbow.

"Look over there!" she whispered.

Not far away stood Sing Lee, leaning indolently against a building. He had been watching the girls. Upon seeing that he, too, was under observation, he nodded and shuffled away.

"Did you notice how intently he studied us?" Louise asked. "We seem to be curiosities."

Penny climbed into the car.

"If you ask me," she said with conviction, "everyone in this town is a bit queer! I'm glad we're leaving it."

CHAPTER

8

TRAILING A HOUSEBOAT

THE MORNING following the storm was bright and sunny. Rain-washed foliage along the roadside had a fresh, glittering color, and the air was dust-free and invigorating. Penny and Louise motored along, enjoying the scene to the fullest, when their attention was drawn to a man on the road ahead who was waving a red flag.

"Now what?" murmured Louise.

"Probably a washout of some kind," said Penny.

The flagman stopped them.

"Sorry, Miss," he said. "The bridge won't carry a car safely. That flood last night did something to one of the piers."

"How do we get by?" asked Penny. "We didn't see any detour sign."

"Ain't had time to put any up," the man said. "Turn around and go three miles back to where the road forks. Take the right hand turn. Go two miles east and three south till you hit the river again. The bridge

there is all right. Then two miles south and two west and you'll be back on this road again."

"I hope I can remember all that," Penny sighed, turning the car in the narrow highway.

"The worst of it is we'll probably miss seeing Mud-Cat Joe and his family," Louise observed. "The detour won't pass his place."

The girls followed the alternate route without mishap but when they reached the main highway again, they saw that Louise's prediction had come true; they had left the Gates abode far behind.

"My idea of buying food wasn't such a good one after all," Penny remarked in disappointment. "The only way we could get it to them now would be to turn back. I'm not sure I could find the place from this direction."

"It's growing late, too. Perhaps we should give up the plan. Couldn't we take the food home and deliver it later?"

"I'm afraid that's all we can do."

The highway circled through dense groves of trees, and the girls caught occasional glimpses of the river, glistening for a moment like a ribbon of silver in the distance, and then fading from view amid the green foliage.

Presently they noticed a stoop-shouldered man walking with an easy gait along the road. He raised his hand as if signaling them to stop. Involuntarily, Penny raised her foot from the gasoline pedal.

"Don't stop!" Louise cried. "It's not safe, picking up hitch-hikers!"

"Hitch-hiker, nothing!" exclaimed Penny. "It's Mud-Cat Joe!"

The brakes screeched and the car stopped just beyond the man.

"Hello, Joe," called Penny. "Aren't you a long way from home?"

"Well dog my cats if it ain't Miss Penny and Miss Louise!" Joe chuckled. His pleasure at meeting the girls again was sincere. "Where you-all headed for?"

"We're on our way home," Penny explained. "We have a basket of food for your wife, but we couldn't take it to your place because the bridge was out."

"That's too bad, it sure is," Mud-Cat Joe replied. "We ain't none of us been eatin' very regular."

"Have you had any word of the River Queen?" Penny inquired.

"A feller jest gave me a tip. His uncle heard tell of a houseboat in the Blue river. He didn't know what business it had a-bein' there, but he reckoned as how it looked right smart like the queen. I'm a-headin' for there now."

"How much farther is the Blue river?" asked Penny.

"Only two—three miles. It runs into the Kobalt down here at Gribsby's Station."

"We'll take you there, Joe," Penny offered. "It won't be much out of our way."

"That's mighty nice of you, mighty nice," Mud-Cat declared as he climbed into the car.

Penny threw the car into gear and they sped down the road. Joe could not take his eyes away from the river.

"I knows ever foot o' water along these parts," he volunteered. "Right over there is the best place to ketch crappie I knows of. There's a rocky reef a-stickin' out from the shore where they likes to hang out. Many a time I've anchored the River Queen on the end of the reef and hauled 'em in till it wasn't fun no more."

"You miss the River Queen dreadfully, don't you, Joe?" asked Louise sympathetically.

"I sure do," Joe answered with conviction. "She was a real boat. I've owned a right smart o' craft in my day, but the Queen laid it over 'em all. She had style and she'd stay afloat in a puddle. And inside she was beautiful. Jennie had fixed her up till she looked jest like a parsonage. Why, she even had a carpet in the settin' room. And purty lace curtains on the winders with a geranium a-perched on the sill."

After this little speech, into which he had put a great deal of feeling, Mud-Cat Joe lapsed into a meditative silence.

The car swung along the winding road. Presently they pulled up at their destination.

"I'm much obliged for the ride," Joe said, alighting.

"We may as well wait here while you make inquiries," Penny said. "Maybe we can help you find your boat."

Joe thanked them and ambled off down to the river bank, all the while looking up and down the stream for his beloved Queen. The girls saw him accost a fisherman with whom he seemed to be acquainted, but from the expression of disappointment on his face they knew he had received no encouragement. Soon he returned to the car.

"Nobody's seen the Queen around these parts," he announced gloomily. "I reckon it was jest another false alarm."

"Isn't that a road going along the river?" Penny said, indicating a narrow dirt lane. "Let's drive up that way and see what we can learn."

Joe climbed in and they followed the tortuous route for some distance.

"It ain't no use goin' any further, Miss Penny," he said at last. "The river's a-running over the rocks here. They wouldn't never git the boat higher up than this."

"We're dreadfully sorry, Joe," Penny told him sympathetically. "But don't be too discouraged. A houseboat couldn't very well vanish into thin air."

"Looks like that's jest what she's done, Miss," Mud-Cat replied, refusing to be comforted. "Reckon we never will see that boat again. And a-livin' like we are now, in an old cow shed, we feels mighty trashy, I'm a tellin' you."

They reached the main road and turned toward Riverview. Mud-Cat Joe rode with the girls until they reached the point nearest his temporary home. There he alighted and the girls gave him the basket of food.

"I won't be a forgettin' all you've done for us," he said gratefully. "Mebbe I kin pay you back for it someday."

"Don't worry about that," smiled Penny.

Neither she nor Louise had the slightest thought that very soon indeed Mud-Cat Joe's words were to prove prophetic—he was to have his opportunity to "pay them back."

CHAPTER

9

PENNY PROVIDES A CLUE

UPON HER way home, after leaving Louise at the Sidell residence, Penny decided to drop in at the offices of the *Riverview Star*, there to talk with her father. Anthony B. Parker was a distinguished looking gentleman, tall and athletically slim, slightly gray at the temples. As his daughter entered the private office, he smiled a welcome.

"You seem in a good mood this bright morning," said Penny. "I take it you've just managed to swipe your competitor's best advertising account."

"Nothing like that," replied Mr. Parker. "Can't a father be glad to see his daughter? To tell you the truth, I was beginning to think you might have had trouble on the road."

"Lena behaved herself for once. But plenty happened to me."

"Did you get your friend safely installed in her new job?"

"Installed at any rate. I'm not so sure about the 'safe' part."

"Why, what do you mean, Penny?"

"The Comstocks seem to have an unsavory reputation at White Falls, Dad. And that house where Laura is staying is a huge barn with more paintings than an art gallery."

"Does that necessarily make it an unsafe place?" inquired Mr. Parker, smiling.

"Well, one of the portraits has a habit of rolling its eyes."

"What nonsense are you talking now, Penny?" her father demanded with a hint of impatience.

"I didn't actually see the eyes move," she admitted. "Laura thought she did. But that's beside the point. According to rumor, a man disappeared in the Comstock house and was seen no more."

"Are you feeling well this morning, Penny?" Mr. Parker inquired anxiously.

"My mind isn't the least bit touched, Dad. I acquired considerable information down at White Falls. Would you like to hear all about it?"

Without waiting for his assent, she rapidly related the facts which she had learned from Lem Vare, the cafe man.

"The man may have a feud with the Comstock family," Mr. Parker commented when he had heard the story. "Gossip is never a reliable source of information."

"I realize that, Dad. But the Comstocks acted queerly about having Laura in the house."

"It's nonsense that a man could disappear from a small community, and no questions be asked."

"He was supposed to be a stranger."

"Even so, if anything such as you suggest had occurred, the news would have leaked out to the police."

"White Falls is too small to have a force."

"I'm afraid there's nothing to the story, Penny."

"Well, for Laura's sake, I hope so," sighed Penny. Abruptly she changed the subject. "Dad, if someone had stolen your houseboat, how would you go about recovering it?"

"Since when did I acquire a houseboat?"

"A hypothetical one," said Penny. "You see, I'm thinking of going into the detective business again. Someone stole Mud-Cat Joe's boat and I've promised to help him find it."

"Who is Mud-Cat Joe?" inquired Mr. Parker. "Penny, why don't you learn to begin your news stories with a 'who, when, where, why, and how' lead? Then I might have some idea what you're talking about."

"Oh, it takes so long to explain all the details," Penny sighed. "Well, settle back in your chair, Dad, because it's a lengthy tale."

However, before she could start to recount her experiences with the squatter family, an office boy came to tell Mr. Parker that a man by the name of Frank Hammond wished to see him.

"Hammond," repeated Mr. Parker thoughtfully. "I don't know anyone by that name. Well, send him in."

"I suppose that's my cue to evaporate," Penny said, getting up from her chair.

"No, stay if you wish. If the man is here to see me about anything important, I can send you out."

"That's just when I'd like to stay," Penny declared. "Maybe I could hide behind the filing cabinet."

"You're not a character in a melodrama," her father smiled. "Please stay right where you are."

The door opened and a middle-aged man in a brown suit who walked with a quick, energetic stride, came into the room. Mr. Parker arose to shake his hand, and after introducing him to Penny, offered the comfortable leather chair reserved for visitors.

"Well, what may I do for you?" he inquired as Mr. Hammond hesitated. "You don't mind my daughter being here?"

"No, no, not at all. I represent the McClure and Allison firm in Chicago. You may have heard of us."

"Oh, yes," said Mr. Parker, instantly recognizing the name of the well known jewelry concern. Interest deepened the color of his eyes.

"I came here upon a rather strange mission," the man continued. "Do you recall a certain story about our firm which ran in your paper perhaps ten days ago? It was to the effect that one of the officers of our company had disappeared with a considerable amount of valuable jewels in his possession?"

"Let me see—yes, I remember the story. Man by the name of Merriman, wasn't it?"

"Yes, J. D. Merriman."

Penny leaned forward in her chair, startled by the name, but she did not interrupt.

"At first, we were inclined to believe Mr. Merriman had beeen delayed on his trip from New York," went on the visitor. "He was traveling by motor, combining business with pleasure. Then later, when we became alarmed and tried to trace him, all we could learn was that he had last been seen at a filling station about two hundred miles from here."

"That was in the story, I believe," Mr. Parker commented. "It was assumed by company officials that Merriman had stolen the jewels."

"The man who talked with your reporter over long distance telephone never should have given out such a statement," frowned Mr. Hammond. "Merriman was a close friend of mine. He was highly respected in the firm."

"Then you believe that he did not steal the jewels?"

"James Merriman wasn't the type of man to resort to theft. He was well fixed financially, and had a wife and two small children. Often he carried more valuable jewels with him than upon this occasion."

"Then it is your thought that he met with foul play?"

"Either that or an accident," said Mr. Hammond earnestly. "Merriman was a rather careless driver."

"What quantity of jewels did your friend carry on his person?"

"The firm has estimated the loss at approximately fifteen thousand dollars. The greater part of this is represented by a pearl necklace. Merriman was bringing it from New York for a special customer of ours."

"The loss was covered by insurance?"

"Yes, we're not worried upon that account. Our fears concern James Merriman. Now my purpose in coming to you was this. Since he disappeared somewhere in this state, or so we believe, we thought your paper might be able to aid in the search."

"We'll give you every possible cooperation," promised Mr. Parker. "However, I should suggest that you engage a detective."

"We turned the case over to the Pallman-White Agency several days ago. However, so far they have made no progress."

"You have talked with the police, I suppose?"

"Yes, but they hold the theory that James Merriman yielded to temptation, and stole the jewels. The insurance company is working on this angle too, keeping watch of various places where the jewels might be offered for sale."

"I will be very glad to give you any possible assistance," Mr. Parker repeated. "However, I don't see just what our paper can do. I am willing to assign a special reporter to the story for a few days."

"Our firm will appreciate your cooperation," Mr.

Hammond declared warmly, picking up his hat. "Thank you for giving me so much of your time."

"Just a minute, please," Penny interposed, her eyes sparkling with excitement. "I think perhaps I have a clue which might help you."

Both Mr. Hammond and Mr. Parker turned in astonishment toward the girl.

"Did you say that your friend's initials were, 'J. D.'?"

"Yes, that is correct," Mr. Hammond declared eagerly.

"I happen to know that a J. D. Merriman spent a night at a tourist house in White Falls. The man registered from Chicago."

"Then that must have been James Merriman!" exclaimed Mr. Hammond. "Where is White Falls?"

"Not far from here, along the Kobalt river," Penny explained. "The tourist house is run by a Mr. and Mrs. Comstock and is called Old Mansion."

"Penny, how do you know that Merriman stayed there?" questioned her father.

"Because I saw his name on the register."

"I shall drive to White Falls at once and talk with the Comstocks," Mr. Hammond declared. "Thank you very much for the clue, Miss Parker."

"You might telephone us and report what success you have," suggested Mr. Parker.

"I certainly shall," Mr. Hammond agreed. "You may expect a call from me not later than tomorrow

morning. If anything important develops I'll telephone earlier."

Mr. Parker walked to the door with the visitor, shaking hands with him as they parted. Returning to the desk he saw that Penny had crossed over to the window and was staring down on the street.

"Dad," she said quietly, "I didn't give Mr. Hammond quite all of my information. When James Merriman spent the night at Old Mansion he was assigned Room seven—the room, according to Lem Vare, where a man mysteriously disappeared!"

CHAPTER

10

A BROKEN CONNECTION

"YOU ARE certain of your facts?" inquired Mr. Parker, rather startled by the information supplied by Penny.

"Well, I saw the register when I signed it. At the time I thought very little about it. I suppose the name stuck in my mind because the Comstocks acted so funny about that room."

"I believe you said they didn't wish you to occupy it?"

"Mrs. Comstock didn't. Her husband was all for chucking me in with those hideous portraits."

"Portraits in a bedroom?"

"Four of them. One fellow in a red cocked hat has eyes that give you the shivers."

"I'm not interested in that part," said Mr. Parker. "But you may have stumbled into something, Penny."

"I think so myself, Dad."

"I'll assign Jerry Livingston to the story," Mr. Parker continued. "He has a nose for news, and he may dig up some interesting facts."

"By that I take it you don't consider mine especially interesting."

"Interesting but a trifle too fanciful for the *Riverview Star*. We can't print stories about portraits that wink and roll their eyes, even if it would brighten up the art section! I'll admit that once not so long ago you proved your old Dad to be a bit too conservative—something about a witch doll, wasn't it?"

"That's right," said Penny. "Dad, if you send Jerry out to Old Mansion, warn him not to mention my name. It might get Laura into trouble with the Comstocks."

"I'll remember. Anyway, Jerry probably won't get out there today. He'll be tied up with the Elks convention story. I'll have him contact the Comstocks by telephone."

"He'll learn nothing that way, Dad."

"Then I'll send Jerry or some other reporter to White Falls tomorrow."

"I thought news stories were supposed to be timely, Dad. If you hurried you might get a big scoop!"

"And we might get a big libel suit," her father added grimly. "We'll have to feel our way cautiously on a story like this, Penny. It's dangerous business publishing that a man disappeared from a certain house, especially when there has been no arrest."

"I suppose you're right," Penny agreed reluctantly. She turned to leave.

"Please ask Jerry to come here if he's in the office,"

Mr. Parker instructed. "I'll give him his new assignment."

Penny closed the door behind her, and spoke politely to Mr. Dewitt, the city editor. She paused beside the desk of a young, dark-haired reporter who sat hammering at his typewriter, hat pushed back on his head. Secretly, Penny considered Jerry Livingston quite the most handsome and brilliant reporter on the *Star's* staff.

"Well, if it isn't our Bright Penny," he chuckled, doffing his hat in her honor. "What's the latest news from the front?"

"I hate to break it," replied Penny in mock seriousness. "Dad wishes to see you in his sanctum sanctorum right away."

Jerry's chair scraped on the floor as he got quickly to his feet.

"What's up, Penny?"

"Shouldn't be surprised if he intends to fire you," she laughed, turning away. "You deserve it."

Penny drove home to find Mrs. Weems, the housekeeper, rather worried over her lengthy absence. She was a middle-aged widow, tall and wiry, with an amazing amount of energy, and had worked at the Parker home so many years that she regarded Penny as her own daughter.

"Have you had your breakfast, child?" she inquired solicitously.

"Yes, hours ago in White Falls," Penny responded.

"Still, if you'd urge me, I could eat a dish of those fresh strawberries you're picking over."

"I declare, you're always hungry," the housekeeper laughed, sorting out the largest berries. "But I wish you would put on a little flesh."

"I don't," declared Penny. "Fat girls simply get nowhere these days. But I do wish my brains would expand a little. I have a job on my hands that requires deep thinking."

"What are you up to now?" Mrs. Weems inquired suspiciously. "I hope it's nothing like that witch doll affair."

"No, I am cogitating upon how to find a stolen houseboat—not to mention a man who disappeared mysteriously from Old Mansion."

"Quite a large order, I should say," replied the housekeeper dryly.

Between strawberries, Penny told Mrs. Weems about her experiences at White Falls. She was pleased when the housekeeper promised to send a box of food to Mud-Cat Joe and his family the next time she made the trip to the river town.

"Oh, by the way, Penny," said Mrs. Weems, "while you were gone Albert Layman telephoned. He said he would like to have you play tennis with him this afternoon."

"He'll have to find some other girl," Penny decided instantly. "I'm staying close at home today. Anyway, Al has pimples."

"Can he help that?" Mrs. Weems inquired mildly.

"Yes, he could wash his neck now and then. Al is a very light-headed youth too," Penny added airily. "I like young men with a purpose."

"Such as that reporter, Jerry Livingston, I suppose," Mrs. Weems observed with shrewd insight.

Penny laughed, and depositing her empty berry dish in the sink, disappeared from the kitchen. Later in the morning when Albert Layman telephoned again, she firmly declined the invitation to play tennis.

All afternoon she remained at home polishing the mud from her car and doing odd jobs which had accumulated. At four o'clock when her father came from the office, she ran to meet him.

"Dad, did he telephone?" she asked eagerly.

"Did who telephone, Penny?" Mr. Parker inquired.

"Why, Mr. Hammond, of course."

"No, not while I was at the office."

"I thought surely he would," said Penny in disappointment.

"Mr. Hammond told us he might not telephone before tomorrow."

"Yes, that is true, Dad. You heard nothing more about the disappearance?"

"No, Jerry will get to work on the story tomorrow after he talks with Hammond. But don't count upon it developing into anything tremendous, Penny."

Despite her father's words, Penny became increasingly excited as she thought of what might de-

velop at Old Mansion. In the morning, she surprised Mr. Parker by climbing into the car beside him when he was ready to start for the newspaper office.

"Why am I thus honored?" he inquired.

"Oh, I'd like to be on hand when that telephone call comes through from Mr. Hammond."

"I can let you know from the office."

"You might forget," said Penny. "No, if you don't mind me being underfoot, I'll just tag along."

During the first hour she busied herself writing letters. After that, time passed very slowly. She read the morning edition of the *Star*, commenting unfavorably upon one of Mr. Parker's editorials, and then wandered out into the main room to watch Burt Kessinger draw a cartoon. She glanced hopefully toward Jerry's desk, but it was vacant. Finally, she went back into the private office and sat down again.

The telephone rang many times, and always Penny straightened alertly, but the call was never from Mr. Hammond.

"What do you suppose is the matter with that man?" she grumbled. "Here it is eleven o'clock, and not a word from him."

"He probably forgot," answered Mr. Parker. "After you've been in the newspaper business as long as I have you'll learn promises don't mean a great deal."

"But he was so emphatic, Dad. I can't help thinking he would have telephoned if something hadn't happened."

"No doubt your clue about Merriman was a dud," said Mr. Parker. "Possibly Mr. Hammond decided to return to Chicago yesterday."

"That needn't have prevented him from letting us know." Penny walked over to her father's desk. "Dad, I have a notion to telephone Laura. She could tell me whether or not Mr. Hammond went to Old Mansion yesterday."

"Not a bad idea. Go right ahead."

Penny placed the call, and in a few minutes was connected with Mrs. Anna Comstock.

"May I speak with Laura?" she requested.

"Miss Blair is very busy," returned the woman, in a strangely agitated voice. "Can't I take the message?"

"No, thank you, I must speak with Laura," Penny insisted. "I assure you it is important."

"You're not a reporter?" Mrs. Comstock demanded.

"No," replied Penny, wondering at the question.

"Just a minute then," said the woman.

There was a long wait while Penny held the receiver. Several times she glanced at her wrist watch, wondering why Mrs. Comstock delayed in bringing Laura to the telephone. She had made a serious mistake in not making a person to person call, for the newspaper was being charged for the elapsed time.

Penny was on the verge of hanging up the receiver, when she heard Laura's voice at the other end of the line.

"Hello, is that you, Laura?" she asked eagerly. "This is Penny. I called to ask—"

"I can't talk now," Laura interrupted in a tense voice. "Oh, Penny, dreadful things go on here! Mr. Hammond—"

There was a sharp click as if a receiver had been replaced in its hook. The connection was broken.

CHAPTER

11

ANGRY WORDS

"HELLO, OPERATOR!" Penny said urgently. "I've been disconnected from my party."

"There is no one on the line now," came the reply. "Shall I ring again?"

"Please."

After a long wait, the operator reported that she was unable to re-establish the connection. Penny hung up the receiver, and turning to her father, repeated Laura's strange message.

"Dad, something is wrong out there!"

"It does seem odd she would refuse to talk," Mr. Parker agreed.

"Mr. Hammond must have arrived yesterday, for she mentioned his name just as she cut off. I suppose Mrs. Comstock may have been listening to the conversation. But even that doesn't account for what she said: 'Dreadful things go on here!' "

"Is the girl inclined to be hysterical?"

"Well, she's easily excited," Penny admitted. "Still, I'm worried."

"Why not drive over to White Falls if it will ease your mind?" suggested her father. "In a couple of hours Jerry probably can ride along with you."

"I'd prefer to start right away," said Penny. "Probably Louise will be willing to go with me."

She lost no time in telephoning her chum, and arrangements were made for the trip. Louise had told her mother about the Gates family, and Mrs. Sidell insisted upon sending a box of clothing and groceries with the girls. Penny was quite willing to stop at the shed where Mud-Cat and his brood had taken refuge, but she regretted the delay.

"We'll make a quick call," she told Louise, as the car drew near the Kobalt river. "I'm terribly anxious to see Laura."

A moment later the automobile halted in front of the shed, but there was no sign of activity about the place.

"Maybe the Gates family has left," said Louise in disappointment.

"I'm sure they are around somewhere," declared Penny, noticing a line of clothes which flapped in the wind between two trees. "Let's try the horn. That will rouse them."

At the sound of Leaping Lena's staccato summons the Gates family came to life. Jennie and Jed peered around the corner of the shed, while Mud-Cat Joe ambled into sight from the direction of the river.

"Well, if it ain't our young lady friends," he said

genially. "Jennie! Come on out here! I allows this is a-goin' to be good news."

"We have a basket of things for you," Penny said. "It's in the rear compartment. Just a few little nick nacks we thought you might like."

The girls stepped from the car and started to get the basket.

"Now then, don't you ladies go an' break your backs a liftin' that," said Mud-Cat. "Let me heft it out of there for you."

Punctuating his words with action, he moved quickly to the rear of the car.

"She's purty heavy, Jennie," he said, weighing the basket up and down in his hand. "There's a lot of store grub here."

"Thank you kindly," said Jennie. "We sure get tired o' catfish day in and out."

"We brought a box of clothing too," Louise announced.

Mud-Cat lifted out the box, and gazed at it with delight.

"Look at that there sweater, Jed!" he said. "Now you kin keep warm this winter. You and the young 'uns. It ain't a goin' to be so shivery like it was last year."

"Thank you," Jed said bashfully.

To further manifest his appreciation, the boy offered to show the girls his most prized possession, his dog.

"Tige's tied up by the river," Jed explained. "He's kind of mean with strangers, but he's sure a swell dog."

Although the girls were short of time, they did not wish to disappoint the boy, and so followed him around the shed. Mud-Cat Joe and his wife carried the groceries and clothing into the shelter and then came down to the river's edge.

"This here is Tige," Jed said proudly, unfastening the dog from the willow tree to which he had been tied. "He's half shepherd and half English bull."

"What a mixture," laughed Penny.

"And that's our raft of chickens," Jed announced, pointing to a flat craft likewise tied to the willow tree. "It used to ride along behind the River Queen."

The boy's remark reminded Penny to ask Mud-Cat if he had gained any new clue as to what had become of his missing houseboat.

"No Miss Penny, nary a trace," Joe replied, sinking into the doldrums. "I asked as fer down the river as Newport but folks sez they ain't never seen 'er. I got a sneakin' idea them skunks that stole 'er has done gone and sent 'er to the bottom of the river."

"What good would that do them?" asked Penny.

"Maybe they stripped her first and then allowed as how they was in a risky business and might get caught. So they just let the river into her."

"Let's hope not," said Louise cheerfully. "I feel somehow that you will recover your houseboat."

Before Mud-Cat Joe could reply another car drove

into the yard. A man alighted briskly and came toward the group by the river. He seemed fairly beside himself with rage.

"Why, it's Gus Comstock!" Louise whispered.

However, Mr. Comstock scarcely noticed the girls, and addressed himself to the Gates family as a unit.

"What are you doing on my property?" he shouted.

"I don't know who you are, stranger," Mud-Cat Joe said in an even drawl that carried the threat of mounting fires in a quiet but dangerous man. "But I might tell you I ain't used to havin' nobody talk to me in them tones."

"Answer my questions," Mr. Comstock snapped. "Who gave you the right to occupy these premises?"

"The right any river man has to live in any vacant buildin' that suits his fancy. And listen, stranger, I'm givin' you just five minutes to get out."

"What!" Mr. Comstock became more and more enraged. "You order me off my own property!"

"I sure do, if it *is* your property." Mud-Cat tossed his tattered hat on the ground and deliberately rolled up his sleeves.

"Mr. Comstock," said Penny, hoping to settle the argument peaceably. "I know this family personally. They have had a great deal of misfortune since their houseboat was lost. If you force them from this shed they'll have no other place to go."

Gus Comstock whirled angrily upon the girls.

"You keep out of this," he said to Penny. "These

dirty squatters are moving, and that's all there's to it!"

"We're not a-gettin' out," Mud-Cat announced.

"I'll show you!" shouted Gus Comstock. "Those squawking chickens are moving downstream right now!"

Drawing a knife from his pocket, he ran to the raft, and started hacking at the rope. Before it could be severed, Jed unhooked the leash of his dog and urged: "Get 'im, Tige!"

The dog made a savage dart at Gus Comstock, who, in sudden terror, dropped the knife.

"Look out, stranger," chuckled Mud-Cat Joe. "That there dog is pure pizen!"

Gus Comstock tried to retreat toward his automobile, but the dog stopped him. The badgered man had only one direction to go—toward the river. He took a step backward, shouting to Jed and Joe to call off their dog or he would have the law on them.

As the man hesitated at the edge of the bank, Tige made another savage rush. He struck hard against Gus Comstock's legs, toppling him into the raft of chickens. There was a wild fury of feathered panic as the fowl flew in all direction. Gus tried desperately to save himself, but the raft gave a sudden lurch under his weight, and with a great splash he pitched into the muddy waters of the Kobalt!

CHAPTER

12

FEATHERED FURY

"HEY, YOU!" Mud-Cat shouted hilariously. "Guess that will teach you to leave my chicken raft be!"

"Oh, Pop!" Jed shrieked. "Ain't he funny? He almost set down on the White Rock rooster!"

"The river ain't wet, is it?" mocked Jennie.

Gus Comstock stood up in the shallow water, spluttering angrily. He shook his fist at the group on shore.

"You'll pay for this!" he warned.

While Jed rounded up the few chickens which had escaped from the wire enclosure on the raft, Mud-Cat Joe tied up Tige so that Gus Comstock could wade ashore.

More outraged than hurt, the man retreated to his car, breathing threats at every step. Even the exhaust of his automobile sounded angry as he drove off down the highway.

"That surely was funny," Louise chuckled. "It served Mr. Comstock right, too. He had no business trying to cut loose the raft."

"Maybe we oughtn't to have sicked the dog on him," Mud-Cat said meditatively. "If that feller does own this shed, I reckon we'll pay a-plenty fer the fun of gettin' rid of him."

"Well, landlords do have a way of ousting tenants sometimes," Penny agreed. "He probably will be back."

"Oh, he'll be back all right," said Joe gloomily. "And I got a feelin' he will be a-bringin' the sheriff along with him."

"What will you do then?" asked Louise.

"I don't know," Joe replied gloomily. "If I could find the River Queen we'd just climb aboard and wash our hands of this here upstart. But a river man without no houseboat is about as lost as a duck in the desert."

"Well, if Mr. Comstock makes trouble for you, I may be able to do something about it," Penny promised. "If he puts you out of the shed, we'll try to find you another place."

"That's mighty kind of you," Mud-Cat said with a sigh. "But I reckon Jennie an' me and the kids won't never be satisfied living on the land. We kin only feel at home on the river."

Penny and Louise bade the family farewell, and drove on toward White Falls. Although they had been innocent bystanders at the little scene by the river, they were dubious as to the reception Gus Comstock would accord them when they reached Old Mansion.

"I wonder if he really does own that shed?" Penny mused. "I suppose he must, or he wouldn't have created such a disturbance."

"How silly to get so excited over a deserted shack. The Gates weren't doing the place any particular harm."

"Gus Comstock just has meanness in his blood," declared Penny.

Presently, entering the sleepy village of White Falls, the girls drew up in front of Old Mansion. The upstairs blinds had been left drawn and there was no sign of activity about the place. However, Gus Comstock's battered car stood on the street, so they knew that he had arrived ahead of them.

Walking up to the front door, Penny and Louise rang the bell. It seemed that the girls' arrival had been noted from within, for almost instantly the door was flung open. Mrs. Comstock confronted them, her eyes blazing wrathfully.

"You're not wanted here," she said harshly. "Go away and mind you, don't come back!"

She started to close the door, but Penny deliberately blocked it with her foot.

"Really, we had nothing to do with your husband's unfortunate accident," the girl said. "Please, may we see Laura just for a moment?"

"No, you can't."

"What right do you have to refuse?" Penny demanded indignantly.

Mrs. Comstock's answer was to slam shut the door, barely missing Penny's foot.

"Ring again," Louise advised. "Hold your finger on the bell until she comes."

"No, that would only get Laura into added difficulties."

"It's not right that she has to work in such a place."

"I agree with you there, Louise."

"If only we could talk with her, we might induce her to return to Riverview with us."

"Something has gone wrong here," said Penny meditatively. "I doubt that we would have been welcome even if Mr. Comstock hadn't fallen into the river. Laura knows something, and the Comstocks are afraid she'll tell!"

"If you believe that, Penny, let's see her even if we have to break down the house."

"We might try the rear door," Penny suggested.

They moved quietly around to the back entrance. The kitchen door was closed.

"You might lift me up so that I can peep into the window," Penny said. "If Laura is there I'll signal her."

Louise obediently raised her chum, but in a moment Penny again dropped to the ground.

"The kitchen is deserted," she reported.

"What do you suppose became of Laura?" Louise demanded anxiously.

"I'm beginning to feel uneasy," Penny confessed.

"It was strange the way she broke off in the midst of our conversation."

"Yes, and all the talk about mysterious disappearances from Room seven," Louise added. "Wouldn't it be dreadful if anything had happened to Laura? It would be our fault for bringing her here."

"Don't say such a thing, Lou. Laura must be all right."

"I don't feel like returning home unless we are certain of it."

"No, neither am I. Suppose we talk with Lem Vare."

The cafe owner was busy refilling the coffee urn when the girls entered his establishment. They sat down on high stools by the counter, and as a pretext for their presence, ordered two pieces of pineapple pie.

"Gettin' to be regular callers in our town, aren't you?" he inquired.

"We came to see our friend next door," Penny explained. "Only Mrs. Comstock wouldn't let us talk with her."

"You don't say? Reckon maybe she's a mite upset this morning."

"Upset?" Penny inquired alertly. "About what, may I ask?"

"Well," said Lem Vare, vigorously polishing the coffee urn, "I wouldn't know, but folks say things have been happening in that house."

"You mean the disappearance?"

"Yes, I reckon maybe Mrs. Comstock is worried for fear the police may come around and ask a few questions."

"Why don't you report the matter, Mr. Vare?"

"Not me! It's none of my business. Anyway, I ain't sure that anything happened—things just look queer."

Penny took a bite of pie, studying the cafe owner's reflection in the mirror behind the soda fountain.

"Mr. Vare," she said, "I don't suppose you noticed a car drive up at the Mansion yesterday."

"Gray one, wasn't it?"

"I imagine so," responded Penny. "Mr. Hammond, an acquaintance of my father's came here to see the Comstocks. He wore a brown suit."

"Sure, that was the fellow," the cafe man nodded. "I saw him go into the mansion, but I never did see him come out."

"You don't mean something happened to him!" Penny gasped.

"No, I'm not sayin' anything like that," Mr. Vare amended hastily. "For all I know, he may have driven off during the night. His car set out front till around midnight, and it was gone this morning when I opened up the restaurant."

"The man may have left town early."

"Yes, reckon that's what happened," Mr. Vare agreed.

He seemed reluctant to answer any more questions, but the girls would not leave until they had inquired about Laura. Their minds were greatly relieved when Lem Vare declared that he had seen the girl hanging up a washing not an hour before their arrival.

"Then I guess nothing too dreadful has happened," Penny commented when she and Louise were outside the cafe. "As far as Mr. Hammond is concerned, I don't know what to think."

"Lem Vare distrusts the Comstocks so that I judge he's apt to jump to conclusions," Louise replied. "He certainly was hinting that Mr. Hammond had disappeared mysteriously."

"I thought so at first, and then he denied it. I really believe we can't go much by what Mr. Vare does say."

"We might drop into the laundry and ask Sing Lee a few questions."

"No, that fellow gives me the creeps," Penny answered. "I doubt that he would know anything, and if he did he'd not be likely to tell us."

The girls walked slowly back to their car, uncertain as to their next move. So far they had obtained no trustworthy information regarding Mr. Hammond, and they were unwilling to return home without at least seeing Laura.

Chancing to glance toward an upstairs window of the mansion, Penny suddenly gripped Louise's hand.

"There she is now, Lou!"

Laura could be seen standing by the window of her room, half hidden by the curtain. She was frantically signaling her friends.

"What is she trying to tell us?" Louise questioned in bewilderment.

"She may mean for us to wait," Penny said hopefully. "I do believe she intends to slip out of the house and meet us!"

CHAPTER

13

IN QUEST OF INFORMATION

REALIZING THAT Laura could not be expected to join them in front of the house, the girls walked past Sing Lee's laundry, stationing themselves out of sight from the Old Mansion. While they waited, a car drove up. Three Chinamen alighted, and paying no heed to Penny and Louise, vanished into Sing Lee's establishment.

Presently the door of Old Mansion opened, but it was not Laura who emerged. Gus Comstock, arrayed in a dry suit of clothes, closed the gate behind him, and with a deep scowl on his face, walked down the street. He paused for a moment by Sing Lee's shop, and then moved on.

"I wonder what is keeping Laura?" Louise worried. "Perhaps we misunderstood her signals."

Just at that moment, they saw the girl coming around the corner of the house. Penny waved to her. With a nervous glance over her shoulder, Laura ran toward her friends.

"I have only a minute to talk," she said breathlessly.

"Mrs. Comstock mustn't know that I have slipped away from the house."

"Tell us what has happened, Laura," Penny urged. "Why did you hang up the receiver this morning when I was talking with you?"

"Because Mrs. Comstock was coming. She warned me that I was to tell you nothing."

"What did you start to say about Mr. Hammond?"

"It's awful," Laura said in awe. "He came to Old Mansion yesterday afternoon to inquire about a friend of his, a man named Merriman."

"I know," Penny nodded. "Merriman had spent a night at Old Mansion some days ago."

"Mrs. Comstock claims he didn't."

"But I am certain of my facts," said Penny. "I saw the name on the register."

"You did?" Laura asked in amazement. "That's funny, because I examined the book myself this morning."

"And the name wasn't there? It should have been just above mine."

"It wasn't, Penny."

"Then the Comstocks have removed it either by erasure, or with ink eradicator."

"They may have done it," Laura admitted. "I know Mr. and Mrs. Comstock were terribly upset when Mr. Hammond arrived."

"What did they tell him?" Penny inquired.

"I heard part of the conversation. They tried to

convince him that Merriman never had stayed at the house over night."

"Did Mr. Hammond accept their story?"

"He acted suspicious of it," Laura admitted. "Possibly that was why he decided to stay all night."

"Mr. Hammond remained at Old Mansion?" Penny asked.

"Yes, I'm sure the Comstocks didn't like it very much. They had an argument over which room they would put him in."

"Not number seven?" Penny demanded.

Laura nodded. "I heard the Comstocks discussing it when they thought no one was listening. Gus told his wife: 'It will serve the inquisitive fool right to sleep in that room. Maybe if he gets a good scare he won't be so impertinent!' "

"And Mrs. Comstock's reply?"

"Oh, she protested, but Gus overruled her. Mr. Hammond's things were taken up to Room seven."

"And then what happened?" Penny questioned. "Was there a disturbance during the night?"

"I heard a faint cry," Laura revealed in a tense voice. "Then a splashing sound as if something had fallen into the river. I can't explain it, but the strangest feeling went over me—I sensed that some dreadful thing had happened to Mr. Hammond."

"What did you do?" asked Louise.

"I slipped on my robe and ran to Mrs. Comstock's room. She and her husband already were awake."

"They had heard the same noise?" interposed Penny.

"I suppose so. Anyway, they went with me to Room seven but it had been locked from the inside. Mr. Comstock called to Mr. Hammond several times. There was no answer."

"The man wasn't—dead?" Louise gasped.

"Mr. Comstock had a master key," Laura went on, without hearing the question. "He opened the door. Will you believe it, Mr. Hammond wasn't there at all! The bed had been slept in, but the man had vanished!"

Penny and Louise were stunned by the disclosure. And Laura's words lent support to Lem Vare's claim that Mr. Hammond would not be the first person to mysteriously disappear from Room seven.

"His clothing was still in the room?" Penny questioned.

"Yes," answered Laura, "nothing appeared to have been touched. The window overlooking the river was open. That was all."

"You don't think Mr. Hammond deliberately jumped into the river?" Louise demanded.

"I don't think so," Laura replied, stressing her words. "Gus Comstock says there's no question but that he did."

"You heard a splash?" Penny asked gravely.

"Yes, or at least I thought so. But if Mr. Hammond's body went into the river last night, I'm convinced he never *jumped*."

"And I agree with you," announced Penny. "Tell me, how did the Comstocks act when they discovered Mr. Hammond was gone?"

"They were both terribly upset, especially Mrs. Comstock."

"Could they have been acting a part?"

"I don't believe so, Penny. Mrs. Comstock carried on dreadfully for a time. She was so ill over the affair she stayed in bed nearly all of the morning."

"Has Gus Comstock notified the police yet?"

"I should say not!" exclaimed Laura. "He said it would ruin him if the news was spread over the town. During the night he drove Mr. Hammond's car away somewhere, and he disposed of all the clothing."

"He can get into serious trouble for doing that," declared Penny.

"Mr. and Mrs. Comstock both warned me that I must never breathe a word of what happened last night. They have watched me almost every minute, too."

"How did you get away now?" Louise inquired.

"Mrs. Comstock lay down for a moment and fell asleep."

"She and her husband must be completely crazy to think they can hide anything like that from the police," Penny said. "It looks as if what Lem Vare told us wasn't idle gossip. This makes two persons who have disappeared from Room seven."

"Mrs. Comstock made me clean up the room this

morning," Laura reported with a shiver. "While I was dusting and running the vacuum, I was so frightened my knees actually knocked together."

"Do you still believe that the eyes of the portraits move?" inquired Penny with a faint smile.

"Perhaps they don't actually move," Laura acknowledged. "But they seem *alive*. While I was cleaning the room I felt as if four pair of human eyes were focused upon me."

"Nerves probably," commented Louise.

"I'd be a wreck if I remained in that house very long," Laura declared. "Sinister things go on there."

"It's fairly easy to understand why Merriman might have disappeared mysteriously," Penny said slowly. "He was carrying valuable jewels."

"You think the Comstocks may have robbed him?" Louise asked quickly.

"No, I'm not venturing an opinion. But it does strike me that Mr. Hammond must have met foul play because he learned something which pointed the finger at the scoundrel responsible for Mr. Merriman's disappearance."

"Perhaps no *person* had anything to do with it," suggested Laura in a low tone.

Penny and Louise gave her a quick glance, wondering what she might mean.

"I don't believe in ghosts," Laura said, half apologetically, "but it seems to me we've run into something which can't be explained. There's an atmosphere about

that house, especially Room seven which defies description. If you were to stay there a day or so—"

"I'd like to have a chance to do it," was Penny's surprising remark. "But Mrs. Comstock won't even allow me to get near the front door."

"One thing is clear," said Louise. "After what has happened, Laura can't stay in the house another night."

"I'll be glad to go back with you," the girl agreed. "That is, if you really want me."

She spoke doubtfully, for Penny's face did not mirror enthusiasm.

"Of course, we'll be glad to take you with us," Penny said, "only I have an idea—"

"Don't listen to it, Laura," warned Louise. "Her ideas nearly always mean trouble for someone."

"This one might prove dangerous," Penny admitted. "I haven't any right to ask it of you, Laura."

"What is it you wish me to do?"

"When it becomes known that two persons have disappeared at Old Mansion, it will mean a big story," Penny said, speaking excitedly. "Every paper in this part of the country will send reporters here, trying to get inside facts. Now here is my idea. I thought if you could bear to stay on for a day or two, Dad would have an inside track on just what is happening. He'd pay you well for your work."

"No amount of money could hire me to stay in that house another night."

"Well, I was afraid the idea was a dud," Penny admitted ruefully.

"I said no amount of money could hire me," Laura repeated with a smile. "But I'll do it for you, Penny! And now, if your plan is to succeed, I must run back before Mrs. Comstock learns that I have left the house."

CHAPTER

14

HELP FROM JERRY

LEAVING LAURA to play her role of sleuth at the Comstock tourist home, Penny and Louise started at once for Riverview. They were deeply excited by the information obtained at White Falls, and both felt that Mr. Hammond's mysterious disappearance called for drastic police action.

The girls had traveled perhaps seven miles from the town when they came to a tributary of the Kobalt river. As they crossed the bridge, Louise suddenly gave a little cry which caused Penny to slam on the brakes.

"What is it, Lou?" she asked quickly.

"See that houseboat half hidden by the willows?" Louise demanded.

Penny brought the car to a standstill on the bridge.

"No, I don't see anything."

"Far down the river, Penny. Almost at the bend."

"Oh, yes, now I do. There are dozens of houseboats in this river district. But it does have a green stack!"

"That's what I noticed," Louise declared. "Could it be Mud-Cat's missing houseboat, do you suppose?"

"There's a chance of it. Shall we investigate?"

Pulling off at the side of the road, the girls made their way along the river bank. Their progress was impeded by a dense growth of bushes. Burs and nettles clung to their stockings and skirts.

"Listen!" Penny commanded, halting.

They could hear the steady "putt-putt-putt" of a gasoline engine.

"The houseboat is pulling out of the cove!" Penny exclaimed. "Hurry!"

Disregarding possible damage to their clothing, the girls scrambled through the bushes and briers, reaching the bend in the river in time to see the houseboat vanishing far downstream. Already it had traveled such a distance that they were unable to obtain a clear view.

"That may have been Mud-Cat's stolen boat!" Penny exclaimed.

"The engine was a powerful one, too," Louise added. "I never saw a houseboat slip along so fast."

The girls watched the craft until it vanished beyond another bend. They could not hope to pursue it farther, for there was no automobile road along the river at this point.

"I'll send word to Mud-Cat Joe just as soon as I can," Penny declared. "It would delay us too long to return to his place now."

"Yes," acknowledged Louise. "And the houseboat may not belong to Mud-Cat anyway. Even a green smoke stack wouldn't be conclusive evidence."

Penny knew that her father would wish to secure the information regarding Mr. Hammond's disappearance at once, and so, upon reaching Riverview, she took Louise home, and then went directly to the newspaper office.

"Dad," she told him rather breathlessly, "you have a new reporter on your staff."

"Meaning yourself?" inquired Mr. Parker.

"No, Laura Blair."

The newspaper owner made a wry grimace. However, before he could offer a protest, Penny related the bargain she had made with the girl, and the information already in her possession. She was not mistaken in thinking that the news of Mr. Hammond's disappearance would prove startling to her father.

"It's almost unbelievable, Penny!"

"Nevertheless, I'm certain it's true. Did I do wrong in asking Laura to remain at the Comstock house?"

"That was a stroke of genius, Penny," her father praised. "It gives us an inside track on the story. And it will be a tremendous one!"

Mr. Parker pushed a buzzer on his desk. When an office boy thrust his tousled head in at the doorway, he said crisply:

"Send Jerry Livingston here."

"Dad, isn't this definitely a case for the police?" Penny inquired.

"Yes," he agreed, "but I'd like to talk with the Comstocks before the police take charge. After an

arrest is made, we'll learn only what the authorities wish to give out. I figure upon taking Jerry and going over to White Falls right away."

"You'll need me along to show you the house," Penny suggested instantly.

Just at that moment, Jerry Livingston came into the private room.

"You sent for me, Chief?" he asked.

Briefly, Mr. Parker disclosed the facts of the case as Penny had presented them.

"Get your hat," he ordered the reporter. "We're going over to White Falls to see what we can learn."

During the ride to the river town, with Penny serving as chauffeur, Mr. Parker explained to Jerry additional details of the case.

"We'll have to handle the story with gloves," he declared. "Penny may have been mistaken in her facts, but if she's right, there's certainly a chance for a big scoop."

The car presently drew up in front of the Comstock tourist house. Mr. Parker stared curiously at it for a moment and then followed by Penny and Jerry, went boldly to the door and rang the bell.

After a long wait, Mrs. Comstock responded to the summons. She scowled as she recognized Penny.

"Well, what do you want now?" she demanded unpleasantly.

"My name is Parker—Anthony Parker from the *Riverview Star*," said Penny's father.

"We're not talking to any reporters," the woman snapped. "Go away and leave us alone."

She started to close the door.

"Just a minute, Madam," said Mr. Parker. "Either you'll talk to me, or you'll talk to the police."

"The police—" Mrs. Comstock murmured, obviously shaken.

"We have reason to believe that two persons have disappeared from your house under decidedly mysterious circumstances, Madam. Will you talk with us, or shall I send for the police?"

"I'll see you," Mrs. Comstock said, with a sudden change of attitude. "Come in."

She led the three visitors into the parlor. Before they could seat themselves Gus Comstock entered from the kitchen. He stared angrily at his wife.

"I couldn't help it, Gus," she said with a little moan. "They pushed their way right in. Said if we didn't talk with 'em, they'd go straight to the police."

"So you're responsible for this, you meddling upstart!" Mr. Comstock accused, turning upon Penny. "Trying to get us into trouble with the police!"

"You are speaking to my daughter," said Mr. Parker coldly. "Let's omit the heroics, if you please. Tell us what became of Mr. Hammond?" Mr. Parker added with a trace of impatience.

"How should I know?" Gus Comstock muttered. "He didn't tell us his business when he went away from here."

"And when do you claim he left your house?"

"Why, yesterday afternoon. He only stayed here a few minutes while he inquired about a friend of his."

"I can prove otherwise," said Penny calmly. "Mr. Hammond's car stood in front of the house the entire afternoon as many of your neighbors will testify. During the night, after the man disappeared from Room seven, you hid the car somewhere."

"That ain't true," Mr. Comstock retorted.

"Falsehoods will get you nowhere," cut in Mr. Parker impatiently. "Either you tell us exactly what happened here, or I'll go to the police. I'm not inclined to beat around the bush."

"Oh, Gus, tell 'em the truth," Mrs. Comstock pleaded fearfully. "If the police come mixing in here, they might take us to jail! And it wasn't our fault."

"Will you keep out of this, Anna?" Mr. Comstock demanded harshly. "It's your loose tongue that will get us in trouble."

However, Mrs. Comstock could not be quieted. While her husband listened in grim silence, she poured out her tale.

"We never did any harm to anybody," she proclaimed tearfully. "Everything was all right until that man Merriman came here. He spent the night in Room seven. When we went to call him in the morning, he had disappeared."

"Why didn't you report to the police?" questioned Mr. Parker.

"Gus said we'd be arrested if we did. We thought we would just keep quiet about it. But somehow the news got noised around White Falls. Lem Vare never did like us, and he saw a chance to start trouble. He kept hinting to folks.

"Then that man Hammond came here to inquire about his friend. We pretended like we didn't know anything of a man named Merriman, but he insisted upon staying overnight. Gus put him in Room seven."

"Why Room seven?" inquired Mr. Parker.

"Just to be contrary, I reckon. He knew it would plague me."

"Then what happened?"

"During the night, Mr. Hammond disappeared just like his friend," Mrs. Comstock resumed her story. "We think maybe they both jumped into the river."

"Mr. Hammond certainly was not the type to do anything like that," declared Mr. Parker. "Have you had the river dragged?"

"No, Gus thought we ought to hush the matter up. If we started dragging the river, folks would know something was wrong."

"They will realize it anyway," said Mr. Parker. "Surely you must know you can't keep two disappearances secret. Your failure to report to the police tends to throw suspicion upon you."

"You don't think we had anything to do with it!" the woman exclaimed indignantly.

"My opinion does not matter. However, I am afraid that the police will be inclined to question the story. As I say, your attempt to keep the matter secret, may count heavily against you."

"But we only did it to protect our business," Mrs. Comstock wailed. "No one ever would stop here overnight if they knew about those missing men!"

"I agree with you there," said Mr. Parker dryly.

"How about taking a look at Room seven?" suggested Jerry.

"See here," Mr. Comstock sputtered angrily, "we'll not have you meddling—"

Paying no heed to the man, Mr. Parker requested Mrs. Comstock to show them to Room seven. They all followed her upstairs. While her father and Jerry made an inspection of the room, Penny slipped away to find Laura.

"How are things going here?" she asked the girl.

"Better as far as I'm concerned," Laura replied. "Mrs. Comstock is so upset, she's not quite as bossy as before. Will she be arrested?"

"I don't know," Penny admitted. "However, I assume both she and her husband will be wheeled off to jail just as soon as Dad reports to the authorities."

"In a way it's a shame," Laura said slowly. "I have no love for the Comstocks, but I doubt that they had anything to do with what happened in Room seven."

Penny chatted for a few minutes longer with her

friend, and then hastened back to Room seven. Her father and Jerry had finished their inspection, and Mrs. Comstock was locking the door.

"I appreciate your position, Madam," Penny heard her father say. "I can see that premature publicity in this case might actually thwart justice."

"Then you'll not go to the police?" the woman pleaded.

"I can make no such promise. However, it is not my present intention to turn over this information to the authorities for at least twenty-four hours."

"I'll do anything you say, if only you'll not expose us to the police."

"I shall expect you to give full co-operation to my reporter, Jerry Livingston. He may do a little sleuthing around here today."

"The neighbors may suspect—" Mrs. Comstock murmured anxiously.

"I don't see what he expects to learn," Gus Comstock added disagreeably. "Merriman and Hammond jumped into the river. It's as plain as the nose on your face."

"A trifle too plain perhaps," said Mr. Parker dryly.

Taking temporary leave of the Comstocks, he led Penny and the young reporter back to the automobile for a conference.

"Well, Dad, what did you think of Mr. and Mrs. Comstock?" Penny inquired.

"I'm inclined to believe they had nothing to do with

Hammond's disappearance. But that makes the case baffling."

"Will you notify the police?"

"Not immediately. I plan to keep the whole thing dark for twenty-four hours, and then blow off the lid. There's something sinister going on in the house, and if we're lucky enough to learn what it's all about, we should scoop every paper in Riverview!"

"Just how are we going to learn what it's all about?" Jerry asked gloomily.

Mr. Parker gave him a quizzical glance.

"That's where you come in, Jerry, my lad," he said. "Tonight you're sleeping in Room seven!"

CHAPTER

15

THE FACE IN THE MIRROR

"I'M SLEEPING where?" demanded Jerry.

"In Room seven," repeated Mr. Parker with a smile. "You'll come back with a corking story."

"If I come back at all," said Jerry significantly.

"You needn't attempt it unless you wish," declared the newspaper owner, speaking soberly. "I know it's dangerous business, Jerry."

"I'm game to try it."

"I thought you would be, Jerry. You'll be armed, of course. I'll station guards somewhere around the house."

"Isn't that apt to give the whole thing away?" Jerry asked. "It isn't likely anything will happen if it's known we're watching the place."

"And the opposing paper may get wind of it too," Penny added. "Then your scoop will explode like a soap bubble."

"Perhaps, you are right," Mr. Parker admitted. "It would be better to have no guards in evidence, but I can't let you take too much risk, Jerry."

"Dad, I know how you could keep folks from suspecting that the house was being watched!" Penny cried.

"How?"

"You might give a big party there tonight. It would be killing two birds with one stone."

"I don't get your idea," Mr. Parker said, mystified.

Penny eagerly outlined her plan.

"For weeks, Dad, you've been saying you intended to entertain your staff. Now Mrs. Comstock's house was just made for a wonderful ghost party. Louise and I could plan all the entertainment, and serve refreshments. Everything would be run off just like an ordinary party. But the townspeople wouldn't suspect what was behind it all, and neither would the reporters of the opposing paper. All the while the party was in progress, Jerry could be keeping his eyes open. And if anything went wrong while he was staying in that room, there would be any number of helpers at hand."

"Well, I don't know," Mr. Parker said doubtfully. "It sounds a bit fantastic to me. Your thought would be to have the party last all night?"

"Into the wee small hours at least. Oh, Dad, it would work out beautifully. The folks invited to the party wouldn't need to know anything about why Jerry was in the house."

Penny was such a persuasive talker, that after Jerry had said he considered the idea a good one, Mr. Parker reluctantly gave his consent. Arrangements were made

with Mrs. Comstock who since her meeting with the newspaper owner had been reduced to the state of a willing vassal.

"I'll leave all the plans for the party in your hands, Penny," her father said. "Can you take care of it on such short notice?"

"Yes, you invite the newspaper gang and I'll do the rest. You might sign over a couple of checks in blank. I'll have to arrange with a caterer to bring in food."

Armed with ample funds and a great zest for the enterprise, Penny lost no time in making preparations for the big party. However, she was not so busy that she forgot to call for a moment at Mud-Cat Joe's shed on her way back to Riverview. The Gates family not being in evidence, she wrote a hasty note, telling Mud-Cat where she had seen a houseboat resembling the one he had lost. Tacking it to the shed door, she then hastened on home.

Mrs. Weems and Louise both came to Penny's assistance, helping her contact caterers, and plan the entertainment.

"Even if it isn't Hallowe'en, we'll have ghost stunts and the like," Penny declared. "That reminds me that I must buy candles. Mrs. Comstock's dreadful furniture won't seem so bad under soft illumination."

By seven o'clock everything was in readiness for the party. Mr. Parker had issued the invitation to all members of the *Star's* staff who would not be required at the plant, and nearly thirty persons were expected.

A caterer had filled Mrs. Comstock's kitchen to overflowing with good things to eat, and the house had been suitably decorated. A five piece orchestra was on hand to provide music for dancing. Penny, so tired that she was ready to drop, still radiated enthusiasm.

"There, I can't think of another thing left undone," she declared, checking over the supplies in Mrs. Comstock's kitchen. Louise and Laura had been aiding her with the task, while Jerry Livingston leaned indolently against the table, now and then helping himself to a frosted cake or an apple.

"Jerry, we'll run short of food if you don't give that appetite of yours a rest," Penny said teasingly.

"I have to have something to fortify my courage," he replied, grinning. "Anyway, this may be the last food I'll ever eat."

"Don't say such things—even in fun," Penny chided.

Jerry glanced out of the window.

"Swell night for something to happen," he said. "Dark, rainy, wind howling. And a nice bed waiting for little Jerry in Room seven."

"I almost wish you weren't doing it," Penny murmured.

Before Jerry could reply, an automobile filled with young people drove up to the door. The girls ran outside to greet the guests, and after that, a steady stream of them arrived.

For the first three hours the newcomers were enter-

tained with dancing, and when that form of amusement began to pall, Penny introduced a series of games and stunts. She was kept so busy that she caught only occasional glimpses of her father or Jerry.

However, shortly after ten o'clock she became aware that the young reporter had disappeared. She felt quite certain he had taken himself to Room seven, there to maintain his vigil. Seeking her father, Penny confirmed the fact.

"Yes, Jerry is up there now," Mr. Parker agreed. "But I'm fairly certain nothing of consequence will develop."

"Why do you think that, Dad?"

"Oh, I believe it was a mistake having this party here. Not that it isn't going over big. You've done a good job, Penny. But I can't see that it will contribute toward our 'scoop.' "

Penny was disappointed by her father's attitude.

"Do the Comstocks know that Jerry is staying in Room seven?" she asked quietly.

"We didn't tell them. They probably suspect by now though, for I instructed Jerry to advertise his presence by turning on the lights."

"Just what did you hope might happen tonight, Dad?"

"Well, I thought someone might try to enter Room seven. Jerry has a gun, and we rigged up a camera trap. All he needs to do is to touch it off. But as I say, our plans probably will be wasted."

"Perhaps not," replied Penny. "Is anyone besides Jerry keeping guard?"

"No, he's alone in the room. I intend to go up there every hour just to make certain he's all right."

Penny had no further opportunity to talk, for she was needed to help with the entertainment. Hastening to the parlor she saw that all lights save one candle had been extinguished.

"You're just in time, Penny," called one of her friends. "We've thought up some games of our own."

"That's fine," declared Penny. "What is this one?"

"Oh, that old Hallowe'en stunt," she was informed. "You hold a mirror and a candle, and see the face of your beloved. Your turn will be next after Louise's."

Penny laughed as she observed how the stunt was worked. In the darkness, a young man slipped up behind the girl who was gazing into the mirror, and the reflection which she beheld was his own.

The game seemed rather silly to Louise, but she pretended to be in the spirit of it, and when her turn came, took her place not far from the window. Holding the candle in her left hand, she stared into the mirror.

Suddenly she screamed, and the looking glass dropped from her hand to the floor. All the color drained from her cheeks.

"Why, what is the matter, Louise?" exclaimed Penny. "Didn't you see the face of your future sweetheart?"

"I saw a horrible, leering creature," Louise shuddered.

"Why, that was only Bill Evans, the sports reporter!" Penny laughed.

Louise glanced nervously over her shoulder, and hastily retreated to a chair by the wall. A shout of laughter went up at Bill Evans' expense, but Penny noticed her chum did not join in it.

"Let's try some other game," she suggested quickly, and before anyone could demur, switched on the electric lights.

At the first opportunity, Penny drew Louise into the hallway.

"You weren't pretending, Lou," she said in a whisper. "You really saw something in that mirror?"

"Yes," answered Louise, glancing uneasily up and down the empty hall. "It was just as I said, a horrible leering face!"

"You're certain it wasn't the reflection of Bill Evans?" Penny asked.

Louise gave her a scornful glance.

"I saw his face in the mirror too, but naturally that wasn't what frightened me. Someone was watching from the window!"

CHAPTER

16

SERIOUS COMPLICATIONS

PENNY QUESTIONED her chum further, but could not shake Louise's firm conviction regarding the reflection she had viewed in the mirror. The girls quietly sought Mr. Parker and communicated the information to him.

"I'll take a look around the house," he promised.

Within fifteen minutes he returned to report that no one could be found loitering near the premises.

"Just the same I feel uneasy," Penny confessed to her father when they were alone. "Louise isn't the type to imagine anything. I do wish Jerry hadn't decided to go through with his plan."

"Well, we might call it off," decided Mr. Parker. "I really doubt any good will be gained by his spending the night in Room seven. It was just one of those happy ideas which didn't seem to work out."

"Shall I run up and tell him now?" Penny asked.

"Might as well, I guess."

Leaving the group of merry-makers below, Penny climbed the stairs. A light was burning in the room

occupied by Mr. and Mrs. Comstock who had agreed to remain in their quarters during the party. The remainder of the upper floor was dark.

Penny rapped lightly on the door of Room seven.

"Jerry," she called softly.

There was no response.

Penny knocked again on the door, and called in a louder voice: "Jerry!"

Still there was no answer, and in sudden fear, she twisted the doorknob.

"Why, it's locked!" she exclaimed. "Jerry! Jerry! Are you all right?"

A wave of terror swept over Penny. Something had happened to the reporter! She felt certain of it.

Turning, she raced downstairs to find her father. He was talking to the society editor, but upon seeing the expression of his daughter's face, he instantly excused himself and joined her in the deserted hallway.

"What is it, Penny?"

"Come quickly, Dad."

"Has anything happened to Jerry?"

"I don't know. I'm afraid of it. When I rapped on the door, he didn't answer."

"The scamp probably fell asleep. Don't get so excited, Penny."

"The door was locked, Dad."

"Locked? That's funny!"

Mr. Parker started up the stairway, two steps at a

time. He tried the door of Room seven, calling sharply: "Jerry! Jerry!"

When his hard pounding failed to produce results, he turned toward Penny, and she saw that he too was excited.

"Something *is* wrong!" he muttered. "This door shouldn't be locked."

"Gus Comstock has a key I think."

"We'll rout him out."

Mr. Parker darted down the hall, and rapped on the door of Mr. and Mrs. Comstock's room. After a moment Gus opened it, peering at the pair with undisguised hostility.

"Now what do you want?" he demanded. "Ain't it enough that you bring a noisy, carousing bunch of folks here, without bothering us when we're in bed?"

Gus Comstock had not been in bed, for he was fully dressed. But Mr. Parker did not take issue with him.

"Do you have a key to Room seven?" he demanded.

"Yes."

"Then open the door for us, and be quick about it!" Mr. Parker commanded. "We're afraid something has happened in there!"

"Again?" shrieked Mrs. Comstock from the bed. "Oh! Oh! This will ruin us!"

"Don't stand there staring, man!" Mr. Parker said impatiently to Gus. "Give me that key or I'll have to break down the door."

Mr. Comstock retreated into the depths of the bedroom, and reappeared with a master key. His wife, drawing a ragged dressing gown over her night dress, followed the group down the hall.

Gus unlocked the door of Room seven and switched on the lights. All eyes focused upon the great mahogany bed. It was empty.

"Jerry's gone!" Penny exclaimed.

Mrs. Comstock uttered a shriek of terror, collapsing in her husband's arms.

"Drop the hysterics," Mr. Parker ordered grimly. "That is, unless you want everyone in the house to learn what has happened!"

"We'll be ruined—ruined," Mrs. Comstock moaned, but she kept her voice at a lower pitch.

Mr. Parker's gaze moved swiftly about the bedroom. There was no evidence of any struggle. The bed spread showed where Jerry had been resting. Evidently he had removed his shoes before lying down for they had been set neatly by the post.

Mr. Parker jerked up the pillow. Beneath it was Jerry's revolver.

"This is the queerest thing I ever encountered," the newspaper man muttered. "No shots fired—not a sound from this room—yet Jerry disappeared from under our very noses."

"Maybe he jumped out of the window like those other fellows did," Gus Comstock suggested.

Mr. Parker gave him a scornful glance, and did not

deign to reply. Telling Penny to remain in Room seven, and to touch nothing, he ran downstairs to contact several reporters whom he knew could be trusted to search the premises.

Returning again to the bedroom, he went on with his inspection. Carefully he examined the camera apparatus which had been set up.

"Here's something!" he exclaimed.

"Did the flash bulb go off?" Penny asked eagerly.

"Yes, Jerry evidently pulled the trigger which was connected with the bed! We'll rush the plates to a dark room!"

"Dad, do you notice a peculiar odor in here?" Penny questioned.

"Now that you mention it, yes! A faint perfume."

"How do you account for it?"

"I don't," said Mr. Parker shortly. "I make no pretentions of being a detective. This is a case for the police."

"No! No!" pleaded Mrs. Comstock. "My husband and I would be blamed for everything which has happened here. And I swear we are innocent! Oh, please, don't notify the police, Mr. Parker."

"The only reason I wouldn't, might be because I fear they would bungle the case," the newspaper owner replied. "We need a very clever detective. I'll send for Gregory Kane!"

Having completed his inspection, Mr. Parker shooed everyone from the room, locking the door, and pocket-

ing the key. He then telephoned his well known friend, the detective, explaining briefly what had occurred at Old Mansion.

"The police haven't been called in as yet," he said. "Bring your finger print equipment, and get over here as quickly as you can, Greg."

At her father's suggestion, Penny made it clear to the guests that the party was over. A few of the reporters were quietly asked to remain, while the others motored back to the city. To one of the *Star's* photographers, Fred Herod, Mr. Parker entrusted the plates taken from Room seven.

"Develop these right away, and see what we have," he directed. "The solution of the case may depend on your work. I'll get to Riverview as soon as I can. Wait at the office for me."

The reporters who had been sent to search the vicinity, returned to report that they had found no trace of Jerry Livingston.

"Keep searching," Mr. Parker ordered. "Until Jerry is found, you'll be on duty twenty-four hours a day. Pick up any clues you can. Hawkes, round up a man who knows the river, and start dragging."

"Oh, Dad," Penny murmured. "You don't think—"

"No," he answered. "I believe that Jerry is still alive. But we can't afford to overlook anything. You see, by delaying in notifying the police, I am assuming a responsibility which might result in a jail sentence not to mention ill-will of the public. We must find Jerry,

and solve the case quickly! If I didn't believe that Gregory Kane is a better detective than any on the police force, I'd never take matters into my own hands so ruthlessly."

"I know a local man who is familiar with every ripple and shoal in the Kobalt," Penny said. "Mud-Cat Joe. He could be trusted not to talk. However, he has no equipment."

"We can take care of that," Mr. Parker replied.

He sent Penny with one of the reporters to contact Joe at once. Despite the late hour, the shanty boat man was roused out of his quarters. Without explaining very much of what had occurred, Penny requested him to drag the river.

"It's sho' hard work rowin' back and forth all day," Mud-Cat sighed, "and it will keep me from a-huntin' for my own boat, but you been mighty good to Jennie and me and the young 'uns, Miss. I'll get at it soon's daylight comes."

"You've not found the River Queen yet?" Penny asked mechanically, climbing back into the car.

"No, I was much obliged to you fer that note you left. But when I got over to Snark River they wasn't no sign of any houseboat."

"My father will pay you well for your work," she told him. "Perhaps, you'll earn enough to buy lumber for a new boat."

Mud-Cat Joe's problem had slipped far into the back of Penny's mind. At another time she would have won-

dered what had become of the houseboat which she and Louise had viewed from the bridge, but now her thoughts were concerned solely with Jerry Livingston.

The events of the night seemed unreal, almost a nightmare. What had become of the missing reporter? She could not believe that his body would be found in the river, yet as her father had said, they could afford to overlook no possibility. Penny felt ill with dread and worry.

Arriving at the mansion once more, she learned that Gregory Kane had come during her absence.

"He hasn't run into a single worthwhile clue so far," Mr. Parker told Penny. "He thinks our best bet may be that photograph Jerry snapped. We'll run over to the *Star* office now and see how it turned out."

"What will be done with Mr. and Mrs. Comstock?"

"Greg is questioning them now."

"And Laura?"

"She'll stay here too. At least until Greg has talked with her."

Taking Louise with them, Mr. Parker and his daughter made a record breaking trip to Riverview. Leaving the girl at her own home, they went on to the *Star* office. Many of the rooms were dark for the final edition had been run off the presses hours before, but lights burned on the second floor where the photographers had their quarters.

As Penny and her father entered, Fred Herod, emerged from the dark room, his hands dripping wet.

"How did it turn out?" Mr. Parker demanded eagerly.

"Well, there's something on the plate. Come on in and look at it."

Penny and her father stepped into the dark room. Fred lifted the plate from the developer tray and held it in front of the red light.

"I can't make much out of it myself," he confessed. "Looks like a picture gallery."

Penny peered over her father's shoulder as they both studied the plate.

"Why, it's the east wall of the room!" she exclaimed. "A photograph of those four horrid paintings!"

"You're right," agreed Mr. Parker in disappointment. "Our clue—the best one we had—amounts to exactly nothing."

CHAPTER

17

A WORTHLESS LEAD

EVEN AFTER the plate was sufficiently "fixed" so that it could be safely exposed to bright light, Penny and her father were unable to find anything in the picture which offered a clue to the mystery of Jerry's disappearance.

"Well, print it up, Fred," Mr. Parker said. "But unless Gregory Kane is a lot smarter than I, I can't see that the photograph will be of any use to him."

Until now the newspaper man had maintained a forced cheerfulness, but his confidence that Jerry would be found, had received a hard jolt. He had counted heavily upon the photograph.

"I blame myself for what happened," he told Penny as they drove toward home. "It was a crazy idea of mine, putting Jerry in that room alone. If we don't find him—"

"We will find him, Dad," Penny said determinedly. "We must."

"I don't give a hang about the story—now. I'd

sacrifice a hundred scoops to prevent a thing like this from occurring."

"It wasn't your fault, Dad. You mustn't blame yourself."

"I'll solve the case if it's the last thing I ever do!" Mr. Parker declared with returning anger. "It isn't sense that three persons can disappear under exactly the same circumstances, and leave no clue!"

The car had reached the Parker residence.

"Aren't you coming in?" Penny asked as her father opened the door for her.

"No, I'm going back to White Falls," he replied. "Maybe there's nothing I can do, but I prefer to remain on the scene."

"Let me know if Jerry is found or if anything new develops."

"The very instant," Mr. Parker promised.

Penny slept fitfully during the few hours which remained of the night. She kept hoping that her father would telephone, but morning came and no word had been received from him.

She was just sitting down to a lonely breakfast, when Mr. Parker's car was heard on the driveway. He came into the house a moment later, looking tired and worn, his eyes bloodshot from lack of sleep.

"Any news, Dad?" she asked quickly.

"No," he responded dejectedly, "That is, nothing of consequence."

He sat down at the breakfast table, saying to Mrs. Weems who had come in from the kitchen: "Just a cup of strong, black coffee, please."

"Dad, you should eat your breakfast," Penny protested.

Mr. Parker shook his head. "I don't feel like it."

"Hasn't anything developed at all?" Penny asked, sinking down in a chair beside her father.

"Not in regard to Jerry. Gregory Kane is of the opinion we may never see him again, or if we do, his body will be taken from the river."

"Oh, Dad!"

"Mud-Cat was starting to drag the river when I left. That means it won't be long until everyone in the village will know what has happened. Not that it matters much I guess. However, when the police get wind of the affair, I may have some tall explaining to do."

"Dad, does Gregory Kane think the Comstocks had any part in Jerry's disappearance?"

"Not that I can get out of him. He did force Gus Comstock to reveal where Hammond's car was hidden. It was found in the woods some distance off a side road. Comstock claims he disposed of the automobile merely to avoid questioning by the police."

"His story has been the same always," Penny acknowledged, "but I don't trust the fellow."

"Greg learned one fact which may interest you."

"What is that, Dad?"

"The Comstocks are not the owners of Old Mansion."

"They aren't? Well, that is a surprise."

"The Comstocks are merely caretakers, but they've lived there so long, they came to regard the house practically as their own."

"Who is the owner?"

"A woman named Irene Faraday, living in Baltimore."

"I wonder if she has any idea what has been going on at her place?"

"No, the Comstocks have kept her in ignorance, fearing that it might cost them their jobs. You see, they opened the house as a tourist place without Mrs. Faraday's consent."

"That was a high-handed thing to do, although quite in keeping with Gus Comstock's character."

"Yes, he figured Mrs. Faraday never would find out, for she hasn't visited the house since she left nearly ten years ago."

"Why has she kept the place occupied, I wonder?"

"Sentimental reasons, I suppose. Mrs. Faraday was married in that house, two of her children died there, and likewise her husband."

"Not in Room seven," Penny said with a shiver.

"No, not to my knowledge. At one time the house was considered quite a show place. But some ten years

ago or more, restrictions were removed and shop buildings went up beside the dwelling. The river cut in closer too."

"Mrs. Faraday then moved to Baltimore?"

"Yes, she employed the Comstocks as caretakers, and leaving everything in their charge, went East and never returned."

"The house was furnished, Dad?"

"Yes, the Comstocks have admitted to Gregory Kane that everything—furniture, paintings, even the glassware—belongs to Mrs. Faraday."

"I rather thought the Comstocks had never furnished that house. However, I can't say much for Mrs. Faraday's taste in paintings. Some of those portraits are mere daubs in expensive frames."

"You're wrong, Penny," smiled her father. "Your friend, Lem, the cafe owner, told me those paintings were considered valuable."

"They may have cost money. But Dad, can't you see how atrocious they are?"

"They didn't appeal to me," Mr. Parker admitted. "However, I don't pretend to know about art."

"Even a blindman could tell those paintings aren't art," insisted Penny. "If they're supposed to be valuable, then someone must have cheated Mrs. Faraday."

"Well, at any rate, she considered them worth enough to merit keeping a caretaker for ten years. The Comstocks received only a small salary and the

use of the property. That was one reason why they began taking in tourists. They needed extra money."

"I wish I knew if Gus Comstock owns that shed where Mud-Cat Joe and his family live," Penny said thoughtfully.

"I doubt if the man has any property of his own."

"So do I," declared Penny feelingly. "The chances are, he was trying to drive Joe off the property belonging to Mrs. Faraday. Maybe as caretaker, he had a right to, but it seems to me, he's suddenly taking his duties very seriously."

"Yes, considering that he has been unfaithful to the trust in other ways."

"Someone should let Mrs. Faraday know about how Old Mansion is being operated."

"I suggested to Gregory Kane that we try to get in touch with her," Mr. Parker declared. "He didn't believe it would do any good."

"She should be informed just on general principles, it seems to me. Dad, would you care if I sent her a telegram?"

"Go ahead if you like," Mr. Parker agreed. "Here is her address, or at least it is the one Mrs. Comstock gave Greg."

He handed Penny a slip of paper, and drinking the last of his coffee, hurriedly arose from the table.

"I'll be at the office for an hour," he said. "After that I'll probably return to White Falls."

When the breakfast dishes had been cleared away, Penny backed her own car from the garage and drove over to see Louise. Together the girls composed the telegram to Mrs. Faraday and dispatched it.

"She'll think the worst when she receives our message," Louise said uneasily. "What if she should come here?"

"I hope she does decide to come," said Penny. "It's time Mrs. Faraday checks up on the Comstocks."

After the telegram had been sent, there was nothing more to occupy their minds. Both Louise and Penny fretted at the inactivity.

"If only we could do something to help!" Louise commented. "It's so hard just to sit and wait and hope."

"We could drive over to White Falls," Penny suggested. "I'd rather be there than here."

"So would I."

By this time, the girls knew every inch of the road between Riverview and White Falls and could make the drive in excellent time. They were approaching the Kobalt river, near the locality where Mud-Cat Joe had made his temporary home, when Penny suddenly applied brakes. Louise regarded her in surprise.

"You're stopping there again today?" she inquired.

Then she saw that Penny's gaze was riveted upon the roadside directly ahead. Jennie Gates, her three children gathered close beside her, sat dejectedly on an old log. Not far away were all their worldly pos-

sessions, a rusty stove, two cots, bedding and a box of cooking pans.

"Something seems to be wrong," said Penny anxiously. "It looks to me as if Mud-Cat and his family have been put out of their home."

CHAPTER

18

DISPOSSESSED

AS THE girls alighted from the car and moved toward Jennie Gates and her children, one glance assured them that the shed bore a new door which had been boarded and nailed shut.

"Why, Jennie, you've not been dispossessed!" Penny exclaimed in amazement.

The woman's disconsolate face brightened at sight of the girls.

"The sheriff done it," she said. "He snuck up here right after Joe went out on the river this mornin'. He says we can't live here no more."

"This must be Gus Comstock's work," replied Penny indignantly. "Yet one would think he would be well occupied with his own brand of troubles!"

"Probably he notified the sheriff before Jerry's disappearance," remarked Louise. "Maybe that day when he tumbled into the water."

"Yes, that would be my guess," Penny nodded, "but it doesn't help matters. Once an order goes into effect it's hard to get it rescinded."

"I dunno what'll become of us now," Jennie said dejectedly.

"Wisht we had our houseboat, Ma," Jed added wistfully.

"Don't talk about it, Jed," his mother replied. "Dreamin' about yer troubles is sure bad luck. Last night I seen that there boat jest as plain as day. There she was, layin' in a little cove, jest as neat and trim as the day she vanished. Then I hears Joe a snorin' like a bull frog with ader-noids. When I come to and knew it was jest a dream, I felt mighty low."

"It's strange about the River Queen," Penny said thoughtfully. "Louise and I both believed we saw it—or one which resembled it closely—down on the Snark river."

"Joe gits lots of reports about it," the woman sighed. "Seems like that boat has a way o' vanishin' before he kin git to where it ain't."

Despite her own worries, and a reluctance to devote any time to the problem of the missing houseboat, Penny decided to take the troubles of the Gates family upon her shoulders.

"Now don't you do any worrying, Jennie," she comforted. "Before nightfall I'll find another place for you to live. And we'll do our best to get you back on the river before long."

"That's mighty sweet of you, Miss Penny," returned Jennie. "I really don't see why you put yourself out fer the likes o' we 'uns. You ain't a-beholdin'

to us fer nothin' I kin make out. But I guess some folks is that-a-way. Doin' a good turn comes natural to 'em."

"It isn't all one-sided," replied Penny. "Your husband is doing us a great favor, too."

Leaving Mrs. Gates and her children to guard their meager possessions, the girls resumed their journey.

"You've let yourself in for trouble, in my opinion," voiced Louise. "It won't be easy to find a new home for the Gates family. No one will want them when they can't pay rent."

"I know," Penny agreed, "but someone has to look after them. It was a mean trick for Gus Comstock to set the sheriff on them. I suspect the property belongs to Mrs. Faraday."

"Then, couldn't you force Gus Comstock to allow the family to remain in the shed?"

"I suppose I could, Lou, because the man is pretty meek since all this new trouble came up. But it's scarcely worth the effort. That old shed never was a suitable place for anyone to live. It will be easier to find a new home for Joe and his family."

"Just where do you propose to discover this new home?"

"It will have to be along the river, or Joe would pine away. There are quite a number of shacks and cottages on the banks of the Kobalt."

"And who will pay the rent?"

"We'll meet that problem when we come to it.

Let's start searching for a suitable place now. Incidentally, we'll keep our eyes and ears open for any information regarding Jerry."

"What could we hope to learn, Penny?"

"Well, there's an outside chance he's being held a prisoner in some old shack along the river."

"You're assuming he was spirited away from Old Mansion," protested Louise. "How could anyone have entered that house with so many persons on guard?"

"Have you forgotten that face you saw in the mirror, Lou?"

"I'll never forget it," replied Louise with a shiver. "But the person I saw, must have been standing at the window. I'm sure he wasn't in the room."

"Can't you describe the face, Lou?"

"No, it all happened so quickly. I just caught a fleeting glimpse, and then it was gone."

"I believe you must have seen the person responsible for Jerry's disappearance," Penny said soberly. "And probably it's someone living right near White Falls!"

"I hope I never meet the fiend," Louise responded. "Just the recollection of that face gave me a horrible nightmare."

"I'd attempt anything if it would help bring Jerry back," Penny said grimly.

She fell silent, occupied with her unpleasant thoughts. Selecting a side road which took them along the river, the girls kept close watch for empty shacks.

They found only one, a place very little better than the old shed where Mud-Cat Joe and his family had been living.

"Let's try the other side of the river," Penny suggested.

They drove across the steel bridge at the outskirts of White Falls, resuming their search. Finally they came upon a woman who told them of a place farther up the river.

"It's a right smart little cottage," she declared. "Partly furnished too, but the owner ain't been able to rent it 'cause the roof leaks. And when the river is high, it sometimes floods right into the yard."

Penny jotted down the name of the man who owned the cottage, and then, casually changing the subject, tried to learn if the woman had noticed anything amiss in the vicinity during the night of Jerry Livingston's disappearance. She had asked the same question many times that day, and had no hope of receiving a favorable reply. However, the woman's words startled her.

"Well, I can't say as I noticed anything out of the way, but folks think plenty about what goes on at Old Mansion. It looks mighty queer to me that they're a-draggin' the river for a body. I said to my husband, says I, 'Chris, if folks was right smart they'd ask a few questions of the Comstocks, 'specially about that motor boat which runs down the river at night.' "

"Is a motor boat so unusual on a river?" inquired Penny.

"No, Miss, it ain't, but when the engine is muffled there's usually a reason for it. I saw the boat three separate times. She was crusin' around Old Mansion, and with no lights. I said to my husband, I says, 'Chris, there's something mighty queer about the way that boat acts.' "

"When did you notice the motor boat?"

"I heard it last night around midnight. The other two times was quite a spell ago."

Penny asked other questions, trying not to reveal anything which would increase the woman's suspicion that things were "queer" at Old Mansion. She and Louise both were excited over the information, for they had not forgotten Laura Blair's claim that on the night of Mr. Hammond's disappearance from the house, she had heard unusual river sounds.

Could it be that the mysterious craft had some connection with the fate of the three men who had vanished from Old Mansion? Penny determined to place her clue in the hands of the detective, Gregory Kane.

First, however, the girls visited the cottage farther up the river. They found it a fairly presentable place, almost directly opposite Old Mansion.

"This should serve the Gates family nicely, if only arrangements can be made with the owner," Penny declared.

The man was located in White Falls, and the girls were pleased to find him a most reasonable individual. He knew Mud-Cat Joe, and learning of his plight,

agreed that in return for certain repair work and a weekly mess of fish, the family might occupy the cottage for the remainder of the summer.

Before returning to acquaint Jennie Gates with the good news, Penny called at Old Mansion. Gregory Kane chanced to be there, and listened attentively as she related the information given her regarding the motorboat.

"I'll look into that angle," he said, but in a tone which convinced Penny he did not consider the clue of great significance.

She did not need to inquire if any progress had been made in the case, for the detective's general air of discouragement told the story.

After a hasty luncheon, the girls returned to the Gates shed, and they were entirely repaid for their trouble, when they witnessed the family's joy upon hearing that new quarters had been secured. Jed ran down to the river's edge, to signal his father, and soon Mud-Cat Joe rowed up to the landing.

"How we goin' to git all our truck down to the cabin?" Jennie asked.

"I can take everything in the car except live stock," Penny declared. "Joe, I suggest you attach the raft to your rowboat, and tow the chickens, the goat and the pigs."

"I dunno how that goat will ride," Mud-Cat said doubtfully. "But we kin try 'er."

Penny loaded Jennie, the younger children and the

household possessions into the car, and arrived at the cottage without mishap. In due time Mud-Cat Joe, his son Jed, and the strange floating zoo likewise reached the site, with the goat still aboard, albeit in a fighting mood.

"This sure is a nice little lean-to," Mud-Cat declared, surveying his new domain. "The roof I kin fix up with a few shingles, and the walls ain't got many chinks. It's a lot better than livin' in a cow shed."

"It's a right purty little house," Jennie added. "It's got runnin' water and a sink. I never had nothin' like that before, even on the River Queen. But we won't be up to payin' no water bills."

"Oh, don't worry about that," Penny answered. "I've taken care of all those things."

"I don't see how we kin ever pay you back," said the shanty boat man.

"You have paid me already." Penny glanced at the old riverman's horny right hand which had been blistered from steady rowing. She knew he had toiled faithfully all day.

"I done a right smart chore of rowin'," Joe agreed. "One of them oars was rough, and then draggin' ain't no fun."

Penny started to turn away, but paused. "Joe," she said, "there's something else you could do for me, if you are willing. I wish you would keep watch of Old Mansion, especially at night. If you see anything unusual or suspicious, notify me or Detective Kane."

The riverman promised that he would do as the girl requested.

"Tomorrow I'll git on with the draggin' agin," he said, following Penny and Louise to their car. "But I figgers I'd a found that body long before this if I was a-goin' to."

The sun was sinking low as the girls crossed the bridge and entered White Falls.

"We should be starting home," declared Louise.

"Yes, but since we're so late, why not have supper first?" Penny proposed. "It will fortify us for the ride."

Not wishing to have Lem Vare ask them inquisitive questions, they sought another cafe farther down the street. By the time they had finished their meal and were starting for Riverview, it had grown quite dark.

"I know the road by heart so there's no danger we'll get lost," Penny said, switching on the headlights.

They had traveled perhaps five miles, when it seemed to her that the car was bumping more than usual.

"It feels almost as if we had a flat tire," commented Louise.

"I was thinking the same thing," groaned Penny.

She pulled up at the side of the road, and alighted to examine the tires. To her relief, they were all sound. However, the tail light was not burning.

"Is the switch turned on all the way, Louise?" she called.

"I'll see," said her chum.

She turned the button, but only succeeded in extinguishing the headlights. At that moment, another car came around the bend. Before Louise could switch on the headbeams again, it drew up at the side of the road some distance away. A man alighted and took a large bundle and a thermos jug from the rear of his car.

Penny moved swiftly to Louise's side, saying in a tense undertone:

"Never mind those lights. Leave them off."

"Why, what's the idea?" Louise demanded, and then observed that Penny was watching the man who had alighted from the other automobile. She did not recognize the person herself.

Taking the paper-wrapped bundle, and the thermos jug, he abandoned the car by the roadside, and disappeared into the woods.

"Didn't you know him?" Penny demanded excitedly.

"No, how could I see his face at this distance?"

"Well, I did!" Penny exclaimed. "I caught a glimpse of it as he stood for a moment in the headlight beam. The man was Sing Lee, Lou! And what wouldn't I give to learn where he's taking that thermos jug!"

CHAPTER

19

HIDDEN IN THE WOODS

"IT DOES seem peculiar that Sing Lee should carry a thermos jug into the woods at this time of night," Louise acknowledged. "Still, he's breaking no law by doing it."

"I wonder what was in the bundle?" Penny mused aloud. "Food perhaps. And to whom would he be taking it?"

Without answering her own question, the girl jerked open the car door, and tugged at Louise's hand.

"Come along!" she commanded. "There's not a minute to lose."

"Penny Parker, have you lost your mind?" Louise demanded indignantly. "What do you mean to do?"

"Follow that Chinaman!"

"I'm staying right here," declared Louise, holding back. "I never heard of such a crazy thing! Just because Sing Lee has a package and a thermos bottle—"

Without taking time to reply, Penny started across the road toward the woods. Louise hesitated briefly,

and then unwilling to be left behind, snatched a flashlight from the pocket of the car, and hastily followed.

"Wait, Penny," she called softly. "I'm coming."

"Hurry or we'll lose Sing Lee."

In the dense woods it was very dark, but far ahead Penny could see the beam of a flashlight focused on the ground as the man who carried it walked swiftly along.

"Penny, I don't know what's in your mind," Louise gasped, trying to keep up with her chum. "But whatever it is, it's a crazy idea!"

"Is it crazy to try to find Jerry?" Penny refuted. "Sing Lee may lead us straight to him."

"You believe Sing Lee took Jerry a prisoner? Why, it's fantastic!"

"That food is meant for someone. If Sing Lee weren't up to something, why would he come here at night?"

They were drawing closer to the Chinaman so Louise did not reply. Yet to herself she admitted that Penny's idea might not be as ridiculous as it had seemed at first. In thinking back, she recalled Sing Lee had been a rather odd character, and it would not be too difficult to imagine that on the night of the party at Old Mansion the face she had seen in the mirror might have been that of a Chinaman.

Unaware that he was being trailed, Sing Lee moved deeper into the forest. Once he paused to listen, glancing backward over his shoulder. The girls flattened themselves against tree trunks and waited. There was

no occasion for fear because the darkness gave them protection.

"Sing Lee seems to be heading toward the river," Penny observed, as the man walked on again.

She had not been mistaken in her bearings. Within a few minutes the Chinaman reached a small tributary of the Kobalt river. He walked along the banks for some distance, coming to a cove which was heavily screened by overhanging bushes and willow trees. Not until they had crept up very close, did the girls distinguish the outline of a houseboat. They were both startled to come upon it so unexpectedly.

Sing Lee whistled twice, and a shadowy figure appeared in the doorway of the shanty boat. A lantern was lighted, and by its glow Penny and Louise saw that the man on the boat likewise was a Chinese.

A few words were exchanged by the pair in their native tongue. Then Sing Lee went aboard the boat, carrying the bundle and the thermos jug.

"Well, what do you think of that!" Louise murmured under her breath.

Risking detection, they crept closer. The houseboat scraped the high bank as it floated, and they were able to peer into one of the windows. In the room which was lighted, three Chinamen sat at a table eating food brought by Sing Lee. The scene was not what Penny had expected to see. She had confidently believed that the laundryman had intended the contents of the bundle and the thermos jug for a prisoner.

"It looks as if Sing Lee is just giving a few of his friends a treat," whispered Louise. "The joke is on you."

She started to move away, but Penny detained her by holding her hand fast.

"Look at the walls of that room, Lou!"

"What about them?"

"They are papered with sheets from a mail order catalogue!"

"That's so."

"And notice the porch."

"Petunias growing in a flower box," Louise observed.

"They've not been watered in days—perhaps not since Mud-Cat Joe's River Queen disappeared."

"You think this is his missing boat?"

"It certainly looks like it."

"But all houseboats are similar," Louise said. "This one has been freshly painted. Joe didn't mention anything like that."

"Can't you guess why?" whispered Penny with increasing excitement. "The boat was painted to disguise its appearance."

The girls quietly retreated from the banks of the stream. When they were a safe distance away they paused to consider their course.

"I might be mistaken," Penny admitted, "but this boat fits Mud-Cat Joe's description of the River Queen. We ought to notify him at once."

"He's received so many false clues already," Louise protested weakly. "But I'm willing to go back if you wish."

"Let's hurry then," urged Penny, "before the boat vanishes again."

In spite of their frantic haste, it required more than a half hour to reach the Gates cottage. Mud-Cat Joe had just finished his supper when the car drove into the yard. He went outside to meet the girls, and became highly excited when Penny told him of her belief that the River Queen lay in a cove of the Snark River.

"I'll git right down there and have a look at 'er," he declared.

"Perhaps we ought to go with you," Penny said, thinking that the riverman might encounter trouble in the event the Chinamen had stolen his shantyboat.

She suggested that he ride in their car, but this he did not wish to do, for unless the girls brought him back he would have no way to return home.

"I kin git down there almost as quick in the rowboat," he insisted. "Current's runnin' swift."

Despite their wish to return without delay to Riverview, the girls decided it was their duty to accompany Mud-Cat.

The man quickly launched the rowboat, and steered for the middle of the river. He bent to the oars, his powerful muscles sending the craft downstream in little spurts of speed.

Penny turned to glance toward Old Mansion where a few lights glowed. The house had a deceptive appearance of peace and tranquility.

The night was cold and penetrating. A breeze which rippled the water served also to chill Penny and Louise long before the boat came to the mouth of the Snark river. They had neglected to bring wraps.

Coming at length to the tributary, Mud-Cat Joe steered the boat into the narrow stream. Penny and Louise began to peer ahead anxiously, for they knew they must be drawing close to the cove where they had seen the houseboat.

They swung around a bend. Penny leaned forward, trying to pierce the darkness.

"This was the place," she whispered.

"But there's no houseboat here!" exclaimed Louise. "Why, what became of it?"

Fearing they might have been mistaken in the locality the girls had Mud-Cat row farther up the stream. It soon became evident that the boat had vanished. Deeply chagrined, Louise and Penny were grateful that the riverman did not chide them.

"This ain't the first time I've had a wild goose chase lookin' fer that houseboat," he said with forced cheerfulness.

"But it was here an hour ago," Penny insisted.

A gloomy silence took possession of the three as Mud-Cat Joe headed the boat toward the Kobalt river once more. It would be a hard row back to the cottage

where the girls had left their car. They reflected it might be midnight before they arrived home. As for Joe, he was tired and worn from his long day on the river, and their failure to find his beloved houseboat could not help but depress him.

The boat presently reached the mouth of the tributary. Mud-Cat steered out into the main stream, setting his course at an angle across the Kobalt. Penny and Louise huddled together to protect themselves from the wind.

They had fallen into a sort of lethargy, a state of morbid drowsiness, when they became aware of a sudden break in the smooth rhythm of Mud-Cat's rowing.

The man stowed his oars, peering out across the dark, swirling waters.

"Jest fer a minute, I thought I seen somethin' in the water," he observed. "Reckon it must have been a big fish."

Penny and Louise stirred themselves, stretching their cramped limbs. With interest they glanced across the rippled water.

As the riverman rested for a moment from his labors, the current caught the boat and swung it sideways. Suddenly Penny leaned forward, and gave a little cry.

"There *is* something struggling in the water! It's surely too large to be a—" She broke off, ending with a gasp of horror. "Joe, it's a man!"

CHAPTER

20

FLAMING EYES

"BY GEORGE, if you ain't right!" exclaimed Mud-Cat Joe. "He's about done up too!"

With a hard pull at the right oar, he sent the boat directly toward the man who struggled in the water. The victim's face had submerged; only a white hand fluttered weakly above the surface.

Penny tore off her shoes, and stood up in the boat, ready to dive overboard.

"Hold on," said Mud-Cat Joe calmly. "I'll git him. Long as a man's strugglin' he ain't drownin'."

The riverman was now close enough to thrust an oar toward the victim who seemed too spent to grasp it. The next moment the boat pulled alongside, and Mud-Cat managed to grasp the man by an arm.

"I got him," he said grimly. "Steady now or we'll upset the boat."

Mud-Cat Joe was a heavy man, and the added weight of the limp figure very nearly capsized the craft, but Penny and Louise kept to the opposite side, trying to maintain balance. The boat wobbled and jerked con-

vulsively. Finally, Mud-Cat Joe succeeded in pulling the relaxed figure over the gunwhale.

He stretched the man on the bottom of the boat, turning him so that his face was visible in the dim starlight. The girls took one glance and gave cries of dismay.

"Jerry!" Penny exclaimed.

A wave of mingled joy and terror swept over her. To have found the reporter seemed nothing short of a miracle, but his condition was deplorable. There was a deep gash across Jerry Livingston's forehead, and his breathing was light and fluttery.

"Your coat, Joe," she commanded, recovering from her first shock. "We must keep him as warm as we can."

The riverman stripped off the garment, and Penny wrapped it about Jerry's own wet clothing. Then, kneeling beside the figure, she began to apply artificial respiration, timing her movements with the reporter's labored breathing.

"We must get him to a doctor," she said to Mud-Cat Joe.

The riverman nodded, and bent to the oars with energy. It was a hard battle against the current, with the boat riding low in the water.

Louise tried to help Penny, but there was very little she could do.

"What could have happened?" she murmured.

"How do you suppose he came to be in the river?"

Penny did not answer for she had felt Jerry stir. He gave a low moan and muttered something which she could not distinguish. But a moment later the words were clear enough.

"Eyes—" he murmured, "Flaming eyes—looking at me—looking at me—"

"Why, he's out of his head," Louise whispered.

"Yes, I'm afraid he's in bad condition," Penny said anxiously. "That gash in his head looks deep. I hope it won't become infected from the dirty river water."

At this particular point there were no cabins or houses along the Kobalt. Penny scanned the shore for a sign of a light, and seeing none, decided that Jerry must be taken either to Old Mansion or to Joe's cottage.

Facilities were much better at the former place, but intuition warned her that it might be wise to keep news of Jerry's reappearance from Mr. and Mrs. Comstock as long as possible. What had occurred in Room seven on that eventful night of the party? Jerry alone knew the answer, but whether or not the secret would remain forever locked in his brain, she could not guess. The reporter had suffered a great shock in addition to his experience in the water—that was evident even to her untrained eye.

Jerry's lips were moving again. Penny bent closer.

"Boat—" he muttered. "Boat."

"Yes, you're in a boat," Penny said soothingly, rubbing his icy hands and trying to restore circulation. "You're with friends, Jerry."

The reporter's eyes fluttered open, but there was no recognition in his glance as he stared at Penny.

"Boat," he muttered again. "Houseboat."

The word startled Mud-Cat Joe and the two girls. They waited tensely, but with a tired sigh, Jerry's eyelids closed again. His head rolled restlessly back and forth on the flooring of the boat. He spoke no more.

"Why you figger he said that?" asked the riverman in a low tone.

"I don't know," said Penny slowly.

Her thoughts leaped back to the houseboat which she and Louise had observed in the Snark river only an hour earlier. The boat had mysteriously vanished. A natural assumption was that it had taken to the main river once more. Was it possible that Jerry had been held a prisoner aboard, and somehow had managed to escape?

Yet there had been no evidence of captives in the houseboat.

"The boat had two rooms, and Louise and I could not see into the one which was dark," Penny thought. "Jerry *could* have been imprisoned there, but it doesn't seem likely. Sing Lee appeared to be taking food to his friends."

The possibility occurred to her that Jerry, while struggling in the water, battling to reach shore, might

have seen the houseboat leave the mouth of the Snark river. Perhaps he had attempted to signal the boat, and failing, had believed that his only hope of rescue was gone.

Such an experience would be likely to leave the houseboat imprinted indelibly upon his mind, and thus his strange mutterings could be explained. But with this theory there remained the disturbing question, why had Jerry been in the water at all? Where had he been held a prisoner? And by whom?

"If Sing Lee *did* have anything to do with this, Gregory Kane might not wish him to learn that Jerry has been found," she reflected. "Until I've talked with Dad, the best thing to do is to keep him under cover."

She then asked Mud-Cat Joe if the reporter could be taken to the cottage, and received a hearty assent.

Watching Jerry anxiously as the boat made its slow progress up the river, Penny hoped that she had made no mistake in her decision. When she reached the cottage, she would summon a doctor at once, and if necessary the reporter could be removed to a hospital.

"That feller looks purty well done in to me," observed Mud-Cat as he pulled steadily at the oars. "I've fished plenty of 'em out of the river, but I never seen one act like him before."

"I'm worried," Penny admitted soberly.

After a trip which seemed endless, the boat at last scraped on the sandy beach beside Mud-Cat Joe's cottage.

"Bring a light, Jennie!" shouted the riverman.

As the woman appeared in the doorway with a kerosene lamp, Mud-Cat Joe lifted Jerry from the boat and carried him into the cottage, the girls offering what assistance they could.

"Jennie, don't stand there a-gapin'," Mud-Cat said to his wife. "Git some blankets and heat stones fer the bed."

Jennie knew exactly what to do, for during her many years on the water, this was not the first time she had been called upon to minister to the needs of a river victim.

"You git them wet clothes off him," she told her husband. "He kin have Jed's bed."

With no ceremony, the boy was routed out of his snug nest, and he stood watching drowsy-eyed as his father rolled the stranger beneath the covers. Jennie heated stones in the oven, which she wrapped in towels and placed at Jerry's feet. She robbed the other beds of blankets, observing: "They ain't nothin' better fer an ailin' man than a good sweat."

"I'll go for a doctor," said Penny.

She and Louise made a quick trip in their car to White Falls. Summoning the village physician, Doctor Hornsley, they took him to the cottage, and then returned to the village once more so that Penny could telephone her father.

"Jerry has been found?" Mr. Parker asked, a break

in his voice. "That's the best news I've heard in a thousand years."

"He's in bad shape, Dad," Penny said. "Doctor Hornsley is examining him now. I'm afraid of the verdict."

"You stay there until I can come, Penny. We'll have Jerry moved to the Riverview hospital, and not spare the cost."

Returning to Mud-Cat Joe's cottage, the girls arrived just as Doctor Hornsley was ready to leave.

"How is he, doctor?" Penny inquired anxiously.

"His condition is grave," replied Doctor Hornsley, peering at her through his nose glasses. "The man has suffered a great shock."

"But he will recover?"

"He has a chance unless pneumonia should develop. However, his mind—" Doctor Hornsley completed his meaning by giving a little shake of the head.

"Oh, that would be dreadful!" gasped Penny.

"Well, he may improve after a lengthy rest," the doctor said cheerfully. "We will hope for the best. I wonder what happened to him?"

"We don't know, Doctor. He was struggling in the river when we found him."

"From the wound on his head, I assume he was struck a hard blow with a blunt object. The skull is not fractured. At least I am unable to determine it without X-rays."

"My father is coming from Riverview," Penny said. "With your approval he plans to take Jerry to the hospital at once."

"That would not be advisable in my opinion. You will do the patient more harm by moving him, than by allowing him to remain."

"But facilities are so limited here, Doctor."

"Perhaps within twenty-four hours he may be transferred to a hospital," said Doctor Hornsley, "but certainly not tonight. I shall try to locate a nurse. In the meanwhile, will you remain here?"

"Yes, of course."

"I have explained to Mrs. Gates about the medicine. There is very little that can be done except to give the patient complete rest."

Doctor Hornsley snapped shut his medicine case, bowing politely as he bade Penny good evening.

While Louise drove the physician back to White Falls, she remained at Jerry's bedside. The reporter's head had been neatly bandaged and the white wrappings accentuated the ashen color of his skin. It seemed to Penny almost as if she were gazing at a stranger. The man on the bed did not seem like Jerry Livingston.

"He just *has* to get well," she thought miserably.

Jennie Gates displayed a surprising amount of common sense in caring for the patient. She closed off the doors leading to the bedroom, and herding her children into the other chamber, insisted that they create no disturbance.

An unnatural silence fell upon the little cottage. Now and then Penny heard Mud-Cat Joe or his wife tiptoe across the kitchen floor, but they did not enter the room where Jerry lay.

The only light came from the oil lamp on the dresser which cast grotesque shadows on the plaster walls. At infrequent intervals, Jerry stirred, muttering words which Penny could not understand.

She began to wish that Louise would return from White Falls, or that her father would arrive. She had never experienced anything so hard as to sit with folded hands, watching Jerry, her heart leaping into her throat every time he made the slightest movement. Penny had never taken care of anyone who was ill. If only the nurse would come soon to take charge!

Presently, she heard a sound outside the window. Someone was walking along the gravel path. It was probably Louise, she thought, although she had not heard the car drive up. Her father could not have had time to reach White Falls.

Penny reached over to rearrange the blanket which Jerry's fluttering hands had disturbed. As she sat back again, listening for Louise to enter the house, she became conscious of a sensation of uneasiness. It was as if she could feel unfriendly eyes staring into the room.

Penny smiled ruefully, thinking that Jerry's mutterings had unnerved her. Then her glance wandered toward the window, and she stiffened in her chair. An ugly face was peering through the divided pane!

CHAPTER

21

A VISITOR FROM THE EAST

ALMOST AS quickly as Penny became aware of the face, it vanished. Of one detail only could she be certain. The person who had looked through the window was a man. A cold chill passed over the girl. The man at the window had been staring, not at herself, but at Jerry, who lay on the bed.

Penny ran to the cabin door. No one was in sight. After a moment's hesitation, she went out into the cool night air, quickly walking around the building. The yard was deserted, and the only sound came from the river where a bullfrog gave a deep-throated "c-lung."

Penny glanced sharply about, thinking that the dense bushes overhanging the river banks would offer a hiding place for a prowler. Had there been the slightest doubt in her mind that she had seen a face at the window, it was dispelled when she found large footprints embedded in the soft earth near the outside bedroom wall.

"Someone connected with those mysterious dis-

appearances at Old Mansion may have seen Joe drag Jerry out of the water," she thought. "We probably were followed here."

More than ever Penny became convinced that the reporter held the key to the situation, but a key which he might never be capable of using. And if Jerry had the power to expose the persons who had harmed him, those same persons would try every possible means to prevent him from revealing his knowledge.

With another uneasy glance toward the river, Penny retreated to the cottage. Calling Mud-Cat Joe, she told him of her suspicion that someone might be lurking down along the willows.

"I'll have a look around," he said, reaching for his lantern. "Maybe 'twas only Silas Slocum you saw. He's a feller to go prowlin' around at night, takin' care of his nets."

Mud-Cat made the rounds, returning to report he could find no one near the cottage. Penny said no more, taking her post by Jerry's bedside again, but she remained firm in her belief that the prowler had not been Silas Slocum.

Later, when Louise came back from White Falls, Penny related the incident.

"Is it safe for Jerry to remain here?" Louise asked in alarm.

"No," replied Penny, "but until the doctor says he may be moved, we can't do otherwise."

"At least Jerry should be well guarded."

"Yes, I mean to talk with Dad about it when he comes."

"Jerry must have gone through a dreadful experience," Louise murmured. "What do you suppose happened to him?"

"I wish I knew," Penny answered soberly. "I'm wondering if we ever shall."

An hour later Mr. Parker arrived at the cottage. The sight of Jerry's thin, drawn face caused him to retreat hastily from the bedroom.

"I'll get the fiends who did this if it's the last act of my life!" he muttered. "Has he tried to talk, Penny?"

"I don't believe he realizes what he's saying," she answered. "He keeps repeating the word 'houseboat,' and he murmurs something I can't understand about flaming eyes."

Penny and Louise both were so weary they felt ready to drop. It was a relief to have Mr. Parker assume full responsibility. He was disappointed that Jerry could not be removed at once to a hospital, but in his usual efficient way, quietly made the best of the situation. A nurse was installed in the cottage, while Mud-Cat Joe was told to maintain a constant guard over the premises.

Penny and Louise felt they could do no more for Jerry, and so rode back to Riverview, arriving only a few hours before dawn.

In the morning the events of the night seemed to have no reality, yet the ache and pain in Penny's body

gave positive proof that she had undergone a most unpleasant physical experience. Breakfasting late, she had just finished her orange juice and toast, when the doorbell rang.

"That may be someone with a message about Jerry," she declared to Mrs. Weems. "I'll answer."

Penny ran to the door, but as she opened it she saw that the elderly, well-dressed lady who stood there, was a stranger.

"Are you by chance Miss Penelope Parker?" inquired the visitor, with a cordial smile.

"Why, yes, won't you come in?"

"Thank you."

The woman sat down on the davenport, loosening her wraps.

"I am Mrs. Faraday," she introduced herself. "You sent me a telegram, I believe."

"Why, yes," stammered Penny.

"Your information alarmed me exceedingly, Miss Parker. I had planned a trip back here for some months, so when I received your message, I decided to start at once. However, I must confess I had no idea you were so young. Tell me, did you not exaggerate the situation at Old Mansion?"

"Indeed I didn't, Mrs. Faraday. If anything I kept serious matters from you. Have you talked with the Comstocks or Gregory Kane?"

"No, I came directly here from the railroad station," Mrs. Faraday replied.

"Then I should suggest that you go to Old Mansion at once."

"Just what is wrong there?" Mrs. Faraday inquired. "You speak so seriously."

"I prefer to have Gregory Kane tell you everything."

"And who is he?"

"A detective."

"Now you do alarm me," said Mrs. Faraday.

"I had intended to go to White Falls today," Penny told her. "If you wish, I'll take you to Old Mansion."

Mrs. Faraday quickly accepted the invitation, and within half an hour, she and Penny were motoring toward White Falls. During the ride, the two became very well acquainted and the girl ventured to ask a question regarding Mrs. Faraday's property holdings in and near the river town. She was not surprised to learn that the shed formerly occupied by the riverman and his family never had belonged to Gus Comstock.

"Why, I am ashamed of the man for turning a poor family from the place," declared Mrs. Faraday indignantly.

"Mr. Comstock has done other things, too, which I fear will never meet with your approval," said Penny. "For example, he has been operating the mansion as a tourist house."

"Indeed!" exclaimed Mrs. Faraday. "Well, we shall see about this. Why, my valuable paintings might have been stolen!"

Penny smiled, for she had her own opinion of Mrs. Faraday's pictures.

At Old Mansion, Gus Comstock and his wife were allowed the freedom of the premises, although Gregory Kane or one of his men, watched them constantly. Such a situation was deeply resented by the couple. They accepted it solely because refusal would mean they would be turned over to the police.

As Penny and Mrs. Faraday drove up to the house, the woman remarked that since her absence the river had cut deeply into the rear yard. She was displeased by the run-down appearance of the mansion, mentioning that only the previous year she had sent the Comstocks money to have it painted.

"You did right to send me that telegram, Miss Parker," she declared. "I have been cheated outrageously."

Her glance encompassed the Chinese laundry adjoining the mansion.

"Such an ugly structure! The town never should have allowed the builder to jam it close to my house. It completely ruins the property."

"It doesn't improve it," agreed Penny. "However, I imagined you knew the building had been erected."

"No, it has been put up since I left White Falls."

They entered the house, and there Mrs. Faraday's indignation mounted to fever pitch. She wandered from room to room, exclaiming at damage done to her antique furniture.

Suddenly she paused before one of the paintings in the library.

"Roll up the window shade please," she requested in a tense voice.

Penny obeyed, and the bright sunlight flooding into the room, made the painting look more jaded than ever. Mrs. Faraday moved a step nearer, running her hand over the canvas. Then she turned to Penny, her eyes flashing.

"This is only a crude copy of the original portrait!" she declared. "I've been robbed!"

CHAPTER

22

SING LEE'S LAUNDRY

MRS. FARADAY went from room to room of Old Mansion, examining the paintings. In the parlor she found one which she declared was an original, but all the others were cheap imitations.

"The Comstocks were employed to protect my portraits," she declared bitterly. "This is the way they betrayed their trust!"

"I don't wonder you are indignant," Penny said. "How valuable were the paintings?"

"At a conservative estimate, thirty thousand dollars. "Where are the Comstocks now?"

"They should be somewhere in the house," replied Penny.

As she spoke, the kitchen door slammed. A moment later Laura Blair came into the room.

"Oh, I'm glad to see you, Penny," she declared. "I was just talking with Gregory Kane outside the house. He tells me there no longer is any need for me to remain here."

Penny presented the girl to Mrs. Faraday, and then

asked quickly: "Laura, what has become of Mr. and Mrs. Comstock?"

"Why, they should be in their rooms. I'll run up and see."

"And please call Mr. Kane, the detective," Mrs. Faraday requested.

Within a minute or two, Laura came back down the stairway, followed by Gus Comstock and his wife. The couple had no intimation of what was in store. Entering the parlor they stopped short.

"Mrs. Faraday!" exclaimed Anna Comstock. "You ought to have written us you were coming!"

"Such information would have been a convenience to you, I'm sure," the woman responded grimly.

"We been doing the best we could here," Gus Comstock muttered, avoiding his employer's steady gaze. "Whatever they tell you, it ain't true!"

"It is unnecessary for anyone to tell me anything, Mr. Comstock. I have a very good pair of eyes. What have you done with my beautiful paintings?"

"Your paintings—" stammered Mrs. Comstock. "Why, they're here. I dust 'em every day like you tell me to do."

"Don't try to pretend," Mrs. Faraday said sternly. "You have sold my original portraits and substituted these cheap, gaudy imitations!"

"That ain't so," Gus said sullenly.

"Then what has become of the pictures?"

"We don't know anything about it," the man in-

sisted. "These are the same ones you left here when you went away."

Mrs. Faraday had lost all patience with the couple.

"Very well," she said, "we will see how far that attitude gets you with the police."

"The police!" Mrs. Comstock exclaimed fearfully. "You won't have us arrested?"

Before Mrs. Faraday could answer, Gregory Kane, summoned by Laura, came into the room. Penny quickly explained the situation to him. A hard smile played over the detective's lips as he took a paper from his pocket.

"This will add another charge to your growing list, Comstock," he said significantly. "You were slated for arrest anyway. I turned the case over to the police this morning, and they sent out this warrant. I'll have to take you both to the jug."

"Don't arrest us," pleaded Mrs. Comstock. "We've been co-operating every way we can."

"Sorry," said the detective, with a shrug. "You'll have to come along now, unless you prefer to have the police haul you in the patrol wagon."

"No! No!" Mrs. Comstock cried. "We'll go now, but it ain't fair! We didn't mean to get into trouble. We only wanted to make a little money."

"So you did sell the paintings?" interposed the detective.

"No, we didn't!" snapped Gus. "Come on, let's get started if we have to go."

Penny, Laura and Mrs. Faraday stepped out on the porch as Gregory Kane led Mr. and Mrs. Comstock to the car. They were not the only spectators. Next door, Sing Lee, leaning indolently against the laundry building, watched with interested eyes.

As Gus was entering the car, he turned and saw the Chinaman. An expression of rage came over his face. He opened his lips as if to make some angry accusations, and then closing them firmly again, stepped into the automobile. Sing Lee smiled, and with a shrug, disappeared into his laundry. The car drove away.

"Perhaps I was too harsh upon the Comstocks," Mrs. Faraday commented.

"No, you weren't," replied Penny. "As a matter of record, Mr. and Mrs. Comstock are involved in far more serious a matter than the theft of paintings. Since the police have been notified, I may as well take you to Room seven and tell you the entire story."

"The door is locked," Laura informed, "But I know where Gus Comstock keeps his master key. I'll get it now."

Returning with it a moment later, she led Penny and the visitor upstairs to the bedroom. Mrs. Faraday was horrified when she learned that three persons had disappeared while sleeping in the chamber.

"Oh, this is shocking!" she exclaimed. "Perhaps the police will blame me because I am the owner of the house."

"It's fairly evident you could have had no part in

the affair," Penny smiled. "However, I did hope you might be able to throw light on the mystery."

"This is the first I have heard about it!"

"I thought perhaps you might know of a secret exit from the room or something of the sort."

"Indeed I don't," Mrs. Faraday responded. "Room seven is just an ordinary bed chamber to the best of my knowledge."

Penny unlocked the door and they went inside. Immediately Mrs. Faraday's gaze focused upon the four massive paintings.

"Imitations, I suppose?" remarked Penny.

"No, they are not even copies. I never owned anything like that in my life! And to think of placing four of them on one wall!"

"It's queer to say the least," Penny said. "I wonder—"

However, she did not reveal the thought which had entered her mind.

Mrs. Faraday could contribute nothing to an explanation of the mysterious disappearances from the room, so after a casual inspection, the door was locked once more. Leaving the visitor to chat with Laura, Penny drove on to Mud-Cat Joe's cottage.

There she learned that Jerry Livingston was considerably improved, although his mind was still far from rational. He had recovered consciousness, and had taken a little food, but as yet was unable to sit up. Doctor Hornsley had called, stating that by late

afternoon the reporter could be moved to a hospital.

"Has Jerry—talked?" Penny inquired of the nurse as they were together for a moment in the kitchen.

"He jabbers constantly, but nothing he says makes sense."

"Poor Jerry," sighed Penny.

"Would you mind sitting with him for a few minutes while I fix myself a bite of breakfast?" the nurse requested.

"Of course, I'll be glad to do it."

Penny went into the adjoining room and sat down by the bedside. Jerry lay motionless, but she thought his color seemed improved. His breathing was even now.

Penny knew that she should not try to arouse the patient, but she could not refrain from leaning close and whispering: "Jerry, Jerry, don't you know me? It's Penny."

The reporter's eyelids fluttered open, and he gazed at her for a moment with an expression which seemed almost normal.

"Bright Penny," he muttered.

The girl could not be sure whether or not he had recognized her. Certainly her words had aroused a chain of association in his crippled mind. She leaned forward and said softly:

"Jerry, what happened? Can't you remember? Was it something about a houseboat?"

"Houseboat," he repeated thickly. "Moving wall."

He began to roll restlessly, and Penny was afraid to ask another question. She was relieved of her duties at the bedside a few minutes later when the nurse came back.

After returning to the car, Penny sat there for a long while, thinking. She dared to hope that Jerry actually had recognized her. Had he really been trying to tell her something?

"A houseboat—a moving wall," she repeated to herself. "The two have no connection."

Since first she had viewed Room seven, Penny had been haunted by a vision of the four grotesque portraits which hung on the east wall. A suspicion constantly lurked in her mind that somehow those paintings had a relation to the mystery. Mrs. Faraday's information that the portraits never had belonged to her, added to the conviction.

"The photograph which Jerry snapped on the night of the party, was of that same wall," Penny reflected. "Dad thought the picture had no value, but I'm not so sure myself."

She had not forgotten Sing Lee's mysterious visit to the houseboat lying on the Snark river. Perhaps it was true he had gone there to take food to his Chinese friends, yet it was possible also that prisoners were held in the unlighted room of the boat.

Penny had made still another observation. She had

noticed Gus Comstock bestow a strange look upon Sing Lee only that morning when the man had been taken away to the police station.

Gregory Kane had questioned the Chinaman, along with Lem Vare, but had learned nothing of value. Neither of the men were considered as suspects in the case.

"It seems to me that an important clue may have been overlooked," mused Penny. "The Chinese laundry adjoins Room seven on the east side. I wish I could get inside Sing Lee's place and look around!"

Second thought convinced her the plan would be a foolish one. Yet she knew from past experience that Gregory Kane did not consider her ideas of great weight, and while he listened politely enough, he never followed up any of the clues. It would do her no good to tell the detective what was in her mind.

"Dad might pay some attention, and then again, he might not," she thought. "I suppose now that the police have been notified, he'll be ready to crack the story wide open before the other newspapers get it."

Penny decided to consult her father, and with this in mind, returned at once to White Falls. During her absence from Old Mansion, Laura and Mrs. Faraday had become well acquainted. Penny offered them a ride to Riverview, but they both declined.

"I have decided to remain here in White Falls for at least a few days," said Mrs. Faraday. "So many

things must be done to the house, and then of course, the Comstock case will be coming up. I couldn't bear to stay in the house alone, but Miss Blair has agreed to share the adventure with me."

"Staying in this house *is* an adventure," agreed Penny. "However, I think you'll be safe enough if you keep away from Room seven."

Leaving Laura and Mrs. Faraday together, she drove back alone to Riverview. At the offices of the *Star* she was told that her father had left only a few minutes earlier for White Falls.

"Strange I missed him on the road," Penny thought in disappointment. "Perhaps, it was because he drives like the wind."

She returned home for luncheon, announcing to Mrs. Weems that she would drive once more to White Falls.

"Again?" asked the housekeeper. "You'll wear out the tires of your car, Penny. I declare, it seems as if you're always going or coming."

"I must see Dad, Mrs. Weems."

Not wishing to make the drive alone, Penny invited Louise to accompany her. Four o'clock found the girls in White Falls, but disappointment again awaited them there. They were told at the Gates cottage, that Mr. Parker and Doctor Hornsley had left less than half an hour earlier, taking Jerry in an ambulance to the hospital.

"Right after they went, some o' them reporter fellers came here," Mud-Cat Joe revealed. "They sure kin ask a lot o' useless questions."

"Reporters?" Penny asked alertly. "From what paper?"

"Reckon they said the *Times*."

"You didn't answer their questions?"

"Sure, I answered 'em," Mud-Cat grinned. "But when they got through they didn't know no more'n they did when they started."

"It's only a matter of time now until the *Times* has the story," Penny said, looking worried. "Oh, dear, the case isn't solved, and Dad will miss his scoop."

"I guess there's nothing we can do," replied Louise. "Shall we start back home again?"

"No," said Penny with sudden determination. "I'm going to try a little stunt of my own! And you must help me, Lou!"

CHAPTER

23

THE GOLDEN IDOL

BEFORE REVEALING her plan, Penny led Louise to the car, so that Mud-Cat Joe would not overhear. She then disclosed her suspicions regarding Sing Lee, and announced her determination to investigate the laundry.

"We'll keep watch of the place," she declared. "Sing Lee is bound to leave sooner or later, and we'll slip in and look around."

"They arrest folks for breaking and entering buildings," Louise said firmly. "Your lovely idea does not appeal to me."

"Oh, we'll take care not to be caught, Lou. You simply have to do it! I just feel we'll discover something if we get inside that place! Think of poor Mr. Hammond, and that fellow, Merriman, not to mention Jerry. We ought to make an effort to trace down every possible clue."

"Well," Louise wavered. "I'd do it only I'm afraid of Sing Lee. He's so sinister looking. And remember that sword?"

"Oh, it had a blunt edge," laughed Penny. "We'll be in no danger, if we wait until Sing Lee goes out for his evening meal."

"I'm weak minded to agree," sighed Louise, "but I suppose I'll have to say yes."

By this time Penny's car was a familiar sight in White Falls, and no one paid heed as she parked it directly opposite the Chinese laundry. The girls called at Old Mansion where they chatted with Laura and Mrs. Faraday until dusk. Then they returned to the automobile to take up their vigil.

An hour elapsed. Louise squirmed uncomfortably in the car seat, complaining that their wait was to be a hopeless one.

"Probably Sing Lee doesn't leave the shop for supper," she declared. "If he's a true Chinaman he'll just cook up a boiler of rice in the back room."

"Lou, you never were cut out for a detective," Penny said goodnaturedly. "We may have to wait here half the night, but we'll finally get in."

Louise sighed and slumped down in the seat again. She scarcely glanced toward the shop as the minutes dragged by. But she sat up as she heard Penny say:

"There, he's turned off the light. Now he'll be coming out."

In a moment Sing Lee emerged from the front door, locking it behind him. He was seen to place the key on the ledge above the door.

"Very obliging of him," chuckled Penny. "Now we won't need to smash any windows."

Sing Lee did not glance toward the car. He walked rapidly down the street and vanished in the darkness.

"Now is our chance," said Penny. "Come along, Lou."

"He may return any minute."

"Naturally. We must take a certain risk."

While Louise screened her movements by standing in front of her, Penny found the key on the ledge, and unlocked the door. Carefully closing it behind them, they entered the gloomy interior of the shop.

"We don't dare switch on lights," warned Penny, "but I brought the flash."

"It can be seen through the windows," Louise declared.

"I'll be careful how I use it. Come on, we have no time to lose."

In the rear room of the laundry, Penny turned on the flashlight. The yellow beam disclosed nothing unusual about the furnishings. There was a table, four chairs, a small stove, the ironing equipment, and half a dozen baskets of laundry.

"Nothing here," said Louise.

"Right," agreed Penny. "We'll try the basement if there is one."

They found a stairway leading down into a dark, dirty hole. At first glance they thought they were

doomed to further disappointment, for the room was crowded with wash tubs, boilers and a drying machine.

"I don't know what you expect to find," Louise said, half accusingly. "But whatever it is, it can't be here."

"Wait a minute," replied Penny. "Let's make a thorough inspection."

She moved about the room, investigating every nook and cranny. Coming to the gas clothes drier, she reached up and pulled out one of the huge sliding shelves. Her exclamation of astonishment brought Louise quickly to her side.

"What is it, Penny?"

"Take a look at this, Lou!"

She flashed her light into the drier so that her chum could see. Three oil paintings, stacked neatly together, their frames missing, and been hidden in the machine. Six additional portraits were discovered in another drawer of the drier.

"Well, now we have found something!" cried Louise.

"These are Mrs. Faraday's stolen pictures, Lou. I'm almost certain of it."

"Shall we take them with us?"

"No, they're too large to carry. We'll have to come back."

"Sing Lee must have considered himself very clever," Louise said, as the girls hurried up the stair-

way to the first floor. "He knew that if the police did search his place, they wouldn't be apt to look inside a drying tray."

"That Chinaman has been up to a lot worse things than stealing a few paintings," insisted Penny. "Now to get up to the second floor. Unless I'm a poor guesser, that's where we'll really find something!"

"How do we reach the second story?" Louise asked in bewilderment. "I don't see any stairway."

"There must be a trap in the ceiling."

By flashing the beam of her light about the rear room, Penny finally located the outline of an opening. She recalled having seen a ladder in the basement and hastened to get it.

"All this is taking time," Louise warned uneasily. "Don't you think we ought to be getting away from here?"

Penny said "no," very emphatically, and placing the ladder in position, cautiously mounted. Reaching the top, she pushed against the trap which easily lifted. Thrusting head and shoulders through the opening, she shot her flashlight beam around the room.

"It's a regular Chinese temple, Lou!" she called down.

Louise hesitated, and then with a nervous glance toward the front of the laundry, came up the ladder after her chum. Penny helped her through the trap door.

In the arc of light, Louise saw a strange looking room, richly carpeted with Chinese rugs. There was an altar with two carved dragons, a large incense pot, and hangings on the walls which bore Chinese characters. Against the west wall, spaced evenly apart, stood four golden Buddhas, impressive but ugly figures.

"Notice a peculiar odor in the room, Lou?"

"Why, yes, I do. Incense, I suppose."

"I detected that same odor in Room seven of Old Mansion the night Jerry disappeared. Lou, we're getting at the heart of the mystery!"

"I don't see what you mean, Penny."

"Look at those four Buddhas closely."

"Yes, what about them?"

"Aren't they spaced exactly the same as the four paintings on the east wall of Room seven?"

"Why, I believe they are!"

Penny crossed over to the grotesque figures which were very nearly her own height. Handing the flashlight to Louise, she ran her fingers over one of the Buddhas.

"Just as I thought!"

Her hand had encountered a tiny knob at the side of the figure. Pulling on it, the front of the Buddha swung outward, revealing a hollow interior.

"Louise, see if you can find the electric light switch," she requested. "I must see better!"

By this time the girls were so excited over their discoveries that they abandoned the last shred of caution. Louise groped about until she located the lights. The room immediately was flooded with a soft amber glow.

"There, that's better," Penny declared. "And it's just as I suspected. Every one of these Buddhas is hollow! I could stand inside—"

"See what I've found in this one," interrupted Louise, her voice tense.

From the base of the figure at the extreme left, she lifted a small cloth bag. She shook it, and then, plunging in her hand drew forth a mass of sparkling jewels.

"Loot taken from Mr. Merriman," Penny cried. "Oh, that Sing Lee was a wicked one! But I'm not just certain how he did it yet."

She stepped into the hollow interior of one of the Buddhas, and stood there for a moment, her back to Louise. When at last she turned toward her chum again, her voice held a queer note.

"Flaming eyes," she murmured.

"What are you saying?" demanded Louise.

"Step inside that Buddha and you'll understand."

Louise took her place, and was amazed to see two small slits cut in the wall which exactly fitted her own eyes. She was able to gaze into Room seven of Old Mansion!

"No wonder Laura thought that the eyes of those

portraits seemed alive," Penny said. "They were."

Louise emerged from the Buddha.

"But why didn't we discover the trick?" she demanded. "I understand now that Lee Sing could stand here and see exactly what goes on in Room seven, but why did we never notice the slits in the paintings?"

"Because Sing Lee took care of that little detail. If you'll step back into the Buddha again, you'll notice a pair of painted eyes hanging on a little peg. They were in place, but I removed them."

"You mean Sing Lee fitted canvas eyes into the paintings during the day time, and then when he wished to use the peepholes, simply removed them?"

"That's just what I do mean. Notice the light bulb in the Buddha?"

"Yes, what significance does it have?"

"I'm not sure, but I believe the light coming from below that way, would produce an effect of flaming eyes when viewed at night in a dark room."

"But how did Sing Lee get Mr. Merriman's jewels, and the paintings? Don't try to tell me he kidnaped three men through these slits in the canvas!"

"No," said Penny, "but the flaming eyes were part of the scheme. Unless I'm mistaken we'll find evidence—"

She broke off, for both girls had heard a scraping sound as if someone had moved the ladder at the foot of the trap door.

"Someone is coming!" Penny whispered. "It's probably Sing Lee."

She turned out the light, and they searched frantically for a hiding place.

"Back of the altar," ordered Penny. "It's our one chance!"

CHAPTER

24

TRAPPED

SCARCELY HAD the girls crouched down out of sight behind the altar when a beam of light shot up on the ceiling above the trap door. Then a head was thrust cautiously through the opening.

By the beam from the electric torch, Penny and Louise saw Sing Lee, a revolver gripped in his hand, climb nimbly into the room. Behind him were three other Chinamen, squat little fellows with ugly, cruel faces.

Penny could feel her chum trembling beside her, while her own heart was beating fast. The ladder leading up to the loft would be a complete give-away. They had practically no chance to elude capture.

"Who ever here, come out quick or Sing Lee shoot!" commanded the laundryman.

Penny and Louise did not stir. However, the Chinamen began a systematic search of the room, and in a moment they were discovered.

Determined not to submit without a struggle, Penny jerked free from Sing Lee, and made a quick dash for

the trap door. She swung her feet down on the ladder, at the same time screaming loudly for help.

Before she could descend, one of the Chinamen seized her roughly by the shoulders, and clapped his hand over her mouth. She was hauled back into the room. Louise, too, received rough treatment.

"Let me go! Let me go!" she cried, striking and scratching at her captor.

Working silently and efficiently, Sing Lee bound the girl's arms behind her, trussed her feet, and inserted a gag in her mouth. Penny was treated in similar fashion, save that it required two Chinamen to subdue her.

"Young ladies learn too much," remarked Sing Lee with a grin. "Most unfortunate. Sing Lee regret they now pay for knowledge."

Turning to his three companions, he spoke rapidly in Chinese. Penny felt certain the conversation pertained to a proposed flight, for immediately the men began to ransack the room. The bag of jewels was removed from the golden idol, and other articles of value connected with the altar, were hastily dumped into a sack.

Then with a last glance about the room, Sing Lee made a mock bow to the girls who lay bound and gagged on the floor.

"Young ladies be comfortable here maybe," he said with an evil leer. "Sing Lee hope you not get too warm!"

The four Chinamen descended from the loft, Sing Lee closing the trap behind him. Penny and Louise heard the ladder being moved out of position. Then they were left to darkness and silence.

Both girls well realized the seriousness of their plight. They had told no one of their plan to visit Sing Lee's laundry. Laura and Mrs. Faraday were at Old Mansion next door, yet they would have no suspicion that anything was wrong, for they had naturally assumed that the girls were returning to Riverview.

Penny felt sick at heart to realize that Sing Lee and his henchmen would escape with Mrs. Faraday's stolen paintings and the jewels. Now, due to her blundering, it might never be known what had become of the two missing men, Mr. Hammond and Mr. Merriman. Not for a moment did she doubt that the Chinaman had been responsible for their disappearance, but she did not fully understand how he had accomplished his evil deeds.

She had noticed an odd collection of levers and machinery behind the altar when she had crouched there. Undoubtedly, it played some part in Sing Lee's scheme.

Penny squirmed uncomfortably, testing the strength of her fetters. The Chinese had done their work well. The cords about her wrists had been tied so tightly she could not hope to loosen them. There was slightly more play in the thongs about her ankles. By long

and hard work, she might be able to get to her feet and hobble a few steps.

Hope suddenly stirred within Penny. If she could roll over to the wall, she might be able to pound it with her feet. It was possible that Laura and Mrs. Faraday would hear the sound.

Louise watched her chum with puzzled eyes, but when Penny had rolled into position, and began beating a rapid tattoo on the west wall, she caught the idea. She pulled herself close to Penny, and they kicked their feet in unison.

Very quickly the girls grew weary and discouraged. There was no response to their signals. They recalled their advice to Mrs. Faraday and Laura, a warning not to go near Room seven. Even if the sounds were heard, the couple likely would be too frightened to investigate.

Resting from her vigorous efforts, Penny became aware of an unusual odor in the room. Smoke! Suddenly Sing Lee's words came back to her, his sneering remark that he hoped she would not be too warm! The building had been fired!

A wisp of smoke filtered up through the crack along the trap door. In a very few minutes the entire laundry would be an inferno.

Louise too had become aware of the danger. She rolled over and moaned.

Fear drove Penny to make one desperate attempt to draw attention to their plight. First pulling herself

into a sitting position, she wriggled to her knees, and then stood up, balancing herself against the wall. An inch at a time, she hobbled to the window which overlooked the river. Far below she could see the murky Kobalt, flowing tranquilly beneath the stars.

No hope—no hope, thought Penny. And then her heart leaped as she distinguished the black outline of a rowboat floating close beside the building. It was Mud-Cat Joe—she was almost certain, but could she attract his attention?

Penny tried butting the window pane goat-fashion, but the noise did not cause the riverman to glance up. The boat was slowly drifting away. In desperation, the girl turned and with a sudden movement, swung her back and shoulders hard against the glass. It shattered, and she heard the broken pieces splash as they fell into the river.

Penny leaned slightly forward through the opening. She could see Mud-Cat Joe, and she believed that he had observed her. He looked upward and shouted:

"What's wrong up there?"

Penny could not answer, but she saw that Mud-Cat realized something was amiss. Then, apparently he smelled smoke, for he shot his boat to a landing, crying loudly:

"Fire! Fire!"

Penny collapsed weakly on the floor. She had done everything within her power, and now could only wait and pray for rescue. Did Mud-Cat Joe understand

that someone was imprisoned in the loft? And would he know where to find a ladder and reach the trap door? Tormenting questions. Each moment the smoke became heavier, making breathing more difficult. Soon it would be impossible for anyone to reach the loft.

Penny's fate and that of Louise rested in the hands of Mud-Cat Joe.

CHAPTER

25

MUD-CAT TO THE RESCUE

HOURS SEEMED to elapse as the girls lay in the smoke-filled loft, and then when hope had deserted them, they heard men's voices below.

"Get the hose running, boys! Someone bring a ladder. Mud-Cat says he saw someone upstairs!"

Penny and Louise thrilled to the words. Rescue was at hand.

A moment later the trap door shot up, and Mud-Cat Joe thrust head and shoulders through the square opening.

"Well, I'll be doggoned!" he ejaculated, and calling loudly for help from below, rushed to Penny and began working at her bonds.

She was soon free, and they both turned to aid Louise.

"Oh, I hope they can save the laundry," Penny gasped. "There's so much evidence here against Sing Lee. It shouldn't be destroyed."

Mud-Cat Joe hustled the two girls down the ladder,

into the arms of a waiting fire fighter. They were led outside where the cool night air came as a welcome relief to their lungs.

Fire was shooting from the lower windows, but it did not appear to have a big start, and there was no wind. The town bell clanged continuously, summoning volunteer fighters to the scene.

Mrs. Faraday and Laura came running from Old Mansion, but before Penny could speak to them, she saw an automobile draw up at the curbing.

"Why, there's Dad!" she exclaimed to Louise, and ran across the street.

"Penny!" he cried. "This building must be saved! I've just learned that Sing Lee is the one behind everything! Valuable evidence will be found in that laundry!"

"You're telling me!" laughed Penny.

Having no suspicion that his daughter had just escaped death, Mr. Parker, and his companion, Gregory Kane, jumped from the car and ran to help the fire fighters. However, their services were not really required, and in a few minutes they came back, satisfied that the blaze was under control.

"Dad, how did you learn about Sing Lee?" Penny asked.

"From Jerry," replied her father. "Greg and I just came from the hospital."

"Is he better?"

"Yes, rational again. He told us what happened. It's a fantastic story, and it may not be true in every particular, although Jerry seemed to realize what he was saying."

"After tonight I'd believe anything," declared Penny.

"Jerry learned everything while he was being held a prisoner. Sing Lee induced Gus Comstock to go in with him on a scheme to steal Mrs. Faraday's paintings. His wife, however, had nothing to do with the plot, although she realized what was afoot when cheap paintings were substituted for the originals."

"It was a crude scheme."

"From Gus Comstock's standpoint, yes. But he was a weak character, and he felt confident Mrs. Faraday never would return to discover the deception. Of course, unwittingly Comstock played into Sing Lee's hands. By threatening him with exposure, Gus could be induced to agree to anything."

"Then he had a part in those mysterious disappearances?"

"No active part, Jerry says, but he had a very good idea of what had occurred. You see, Sing Lee placed four portraits in Room seven, all against the east wall."

"I could tell you something about those pictures," Penny said, but her father did not notice the interruption.

"This is the part I can't believe," Mr. Parker went

on. "I fear Jerry is still a bit mixed up. Anyway, he claims that after he retired to Room seven that night of the party, all was quiet for nearly two hours. He was just dozing when a noise drew his attention toward the paintings on the east wall. At the same time he became conscious of an overpowering perfume in the room. Then the eyes of those paintings, four pair of them, focused upon him. The way Jerry described it made the chills run down my spine."

"Then what happened, Dad?"

"Jerry believed that the incense produced an overpowering sense of fear in its victims. In any case, the sight of those eyes staring at him, was terrifying enough. He snapped the photograph, and moved to the door. It was locked—probably from some trick mechanism. Jerry declares definitely that he had not locked it himself.

"By this time, he was pretty well worked up. He tried to shout but couldn't utter a word. The incense kept pouring into the room, and those burning eyes from the portraits all focused on him. Then, a panel in the south wall slid open.

"Jerry said he didn't seem to have control of his own body. His one thought was to escape from that room. In terror he fled through the opening."

"And dropped straight into the river," said Penny.

"Yes, the cold plunge brought him to his senses, but before he could start to swim, a motor boat came

alongside, and he was hauled in by a Chinaman. Jerry was robbed of his watch and a ring, and taken downstream to a houseboat."

"A houseboat!" exclaimed Penny. "Then Louise and I really found the hide-out and didn't realize it."

"Jerry was imprisoned along with two other men—Hammond and Merriman. He learned their stories. Merriman had been robbed of his jewels, while Hammond was being kept there to prevent him from disclosing his knowledge. That was why Sing Lee captured Jerry too. Having learned that he was a reporter, he feared exposure."

"Why didn't Sing Lee simply take his loot and disappear?"

"His tongmen, there are some eight or ten involved in the plot, were greedy for more money. They brought pressure on Sing Lee to keep up the little game a week longer."

"How did Jerry escape?"

"He managed to get away when one of his captors brought food. Merriman and Hammond helped him to overpower the man, and Jerry jumped overboard, but not before he had been struck on the head. You know the rest of the story. He'd never have reached land if Mud-Cat Joe's boat hadn't been handy to pick him up."

Before Mr. Parker could say more, Laura Blair hurried up.

"Oh, Penny," she said, "you had such a narrow escape from death!"

Mr. Parker turned to stare at his daughter, bewildered by the remark.

"Oh, Louise and I had a little adventure with Sing Lee," Penny laughed.

She related the story and told of their findings in the basement of the laundry and in the temple.

"That machinery behind the altar must have served to move the wall panel," she declared. "Oh, Sing Lee was very wicked and very clever. I'm afraid he escaped with all the loot and will never be seen again."

"There's a good chance he'll be caught," Mr. Parker insisted. "The police have sent a squad to search for the houseboat where Merriman and Hammond are still imprisoned. They may be able to surprise Sing Lee there."

"If the houseboat can be located," Penny added. "It has a tricky little habit of vanishing at inconvenient moments!"

"Jerry said it hid out in a narrow river most of the time, venturing on the Kobalt only occasionally. But he was kept blindfolded, and couldn't identify the stream."

"I'm sure it was the Snark river!" Penny exclaimed. "That's where Louise and I last saw the boat."

"Then the police will never find it, because they didn't start for the Snark river!" Mr. Parker cried.

"Where's Greg? We'll organize our own searching party!"

By this time the fire was well under control, and any number of men, incensed because Sing Lee had left the girls in a burning building, were eager to track him down. Mr. Parker and the detective hastily loaded the volunteers into cars. Penny and Louise crowded in beside Mr. Parker, to lead the way to the Snark river.

Presently abandoning the automobiles, the searching party took to the woods. Drawing close to the river, Gregory Kane assumed command of the situation, instructing the men to move quietly and to be careful in any use of firearms.

There was no sign of a houseboat when they reached the banks of the Snark, so the party broke into two groups. Mr. Parker led some of the men upstream, while the others walked toward the mouth of the river.

Penny and Louise remained with Mud-Cat Joe, and Mr. Parker. They had gone only a short distance, when a low spoken command for silence was given. From far up the stream could be heard the muffled beat of an engine.

"That may be the houseboat coming," Mr. Parker warned. "Spread out men, along the banks where the stream is narrow. If I fire a shot, leap aboard her."

Scarcely had the men hidden themselves in the bushes when the boat chugged slowly into view.

"Doggone, if that ain't my missin' houseboat!" Mud-

Cat Joe muttered. "Jest give me a chance at them Chinks!"

A shot rang out. As the houseboat grated softly against the river bank, a dozen men sprang aboard, and those who did not have revolvers had armed themselves with big sticks. Mud-Cat Joe wielded his club with deadly intent, determined to avenge himself upon the persons who had robbed him of his houseboat. He felled two Chinamen neatly, and was sadly disappointed when the others took refuge and pleaded for mercy.

Sing Lee alone made an attempt to escape by trying to shoot his way out of the cabin. He was quickly overpowered.

The sound of firing brought Gregory Kane, who provided handcuffs for all the Chinamen. A key taken from Sing Lee opened the padlocked inner door of the houseboat, and there, crudely trussed up, lay the two prisoners, Mr. Merriman and his friend, Frank Hammond.

They were rushed at once to a hospital although their condition did not appear to be critical. Gregory Kane took charge of Sing Lee and his henchmen, and assumed responsibility for the loot found on the boat. In addition to the jewels stolen from Merriman, Mrs. Faraday's paintings were recovered undamaged, and there likewise was a box of gold coins which when counted totaled nearly a thousand dollars.

"Them no 'count Chinks sure banged up the River Queen a-plenty," Mud-Cat Joe declared, as he inspected his new found property. "But I kin fix her up again as good as new. I sure am much obliged to you, Miss, fer leadin' me to her."

"And I'm grateful to you for saving my life," replied Penny.

Mr. Parker echoed the words, adding emphatically: "You'll certainly hear from me within a few days, Joe. Right now I must get back to Riverview. This is a big story, and I want to freeze it in type before the *Times* learns what is up."

"May I help?" Penny asked quickly.

"I'm depending upon you to write an account of everything you found in Sing Lee's laundry. Make it thorough."

"Even the dirty shirts?"

Ignoring the quip, Mr. Parker said tersely: "We must step too! Time is precious."

Penny's recollection of the fast ride back to Riverview always remained a trifle blurred. Her thoughts centered upon the story she was to write; she mentally blocked out the lead, so that she would be ready to dash it off, the moment she slid into a typewriter chair.

They reached the newspaper office where members of the editorial staff were enjoying a brief rest between editions.

"We're putting out an extra," tersely informed Mr. Parker. "Hammond and Merriman have been found. The whole case is cleaned up. A banner for the front page, Dewitt! And make it a triple-decker across all the columns. I'll handle the main story myself, right-hand column with a break on page two. Penny's story will take the left column. Can you handle that much?"

"Easily," she replied.

"Dig up that flashlight photograph of the portraits in Room seven! we'll run it on page one. We'll also need pictures of Mud-Cat Joe's houseboat, Old Mansion, and Sing Lee's gang, but they can catch the second edition. The thing now is to get those presses rolling!"

Penny vanished into her father's office and sat down at the typewriter. The story seemed to write itself. Words, sentences, paragraphs flowed into her mind, and transferred themselves to paper.

She was only vaguely aware as the city editor, in showing her father the "dummy" for the front page, peered over her shoulder to read what she had written.

"Great stuff," he praised. "Keep it up."

Penny filled five sheets of copy paper, and then sat back in her chair, satisfied she had done her task well.

"The presses are all ready to roll," Mr. Parker grinned. "Once they start, nothing can stop them!"

Like an excited schoolboy he paced the floor, and could not relax until the first issue of the paper was

placed in his hand. Peering over her father's shoulder, Penny felt a thrill of pride as she saw her own name signed to the story she had just written.

"It's a beautiful lay-out, every bit of it," declared Mr. Parker. "You took care of your part like a veteran, Penny."

"I wish Jerry could see the story," she said wistfully.

"There's no reason why he can't!" exclaimed Mr. Parker, taken by the idea. "We'll show it to him."

As they went out the building, newsboys were crying the *Star's* latest scoop. The headlines were music to Penny's ears. In the car, driving toward the hospital, she slumped down against her father's shoulder, happy but very tired.

"Everything turned out beautifully," she sighed. "You achieved your scoop, Mud-Cat Joe recovered his houseboat, and Jerry will get well."

"Yes, the breaks did come our way, Penny."

"I suppose Sing Lee will be sent to prison?"

"Undoubtedly. Gus Comstock may have to serve a sentence too, but his wife should get off lightly."

"Well, I'm rather glad of that, even if I never liked her. I wonder what will become of Laura."

"Maybe I can find a job for her, but I fear she'll never make a newspaper reporter."

"No," agreed Penny. "The work would kill a stronger person than Laura."

As it later developed, there was no need for anyone

to worry over her future. Laura had made a deep impression upon Mrs. Faraday, with the result that when she returned East she took the girl with her to serve as secretary and companion.

Mr. Parker and Penny arrived at the hospital too late for the usual visiting hours, but they were allowed to see Jerry. The young reporter, still pale and weak, had raised himself to a half-sitting posture. He appeared to be listening intently to some far-off sound, and returned his visitors' greeting in perfunctory fashion.

"Listen!" he said, "I thought I heard the boys crying an extra."

"You did," Mr. Parker answered. "And here is a copy of it."

He spread the edition on the bed. Jerry read eagerly, such comments as "Great stuff!", "What a scoop!", falling from his lips.

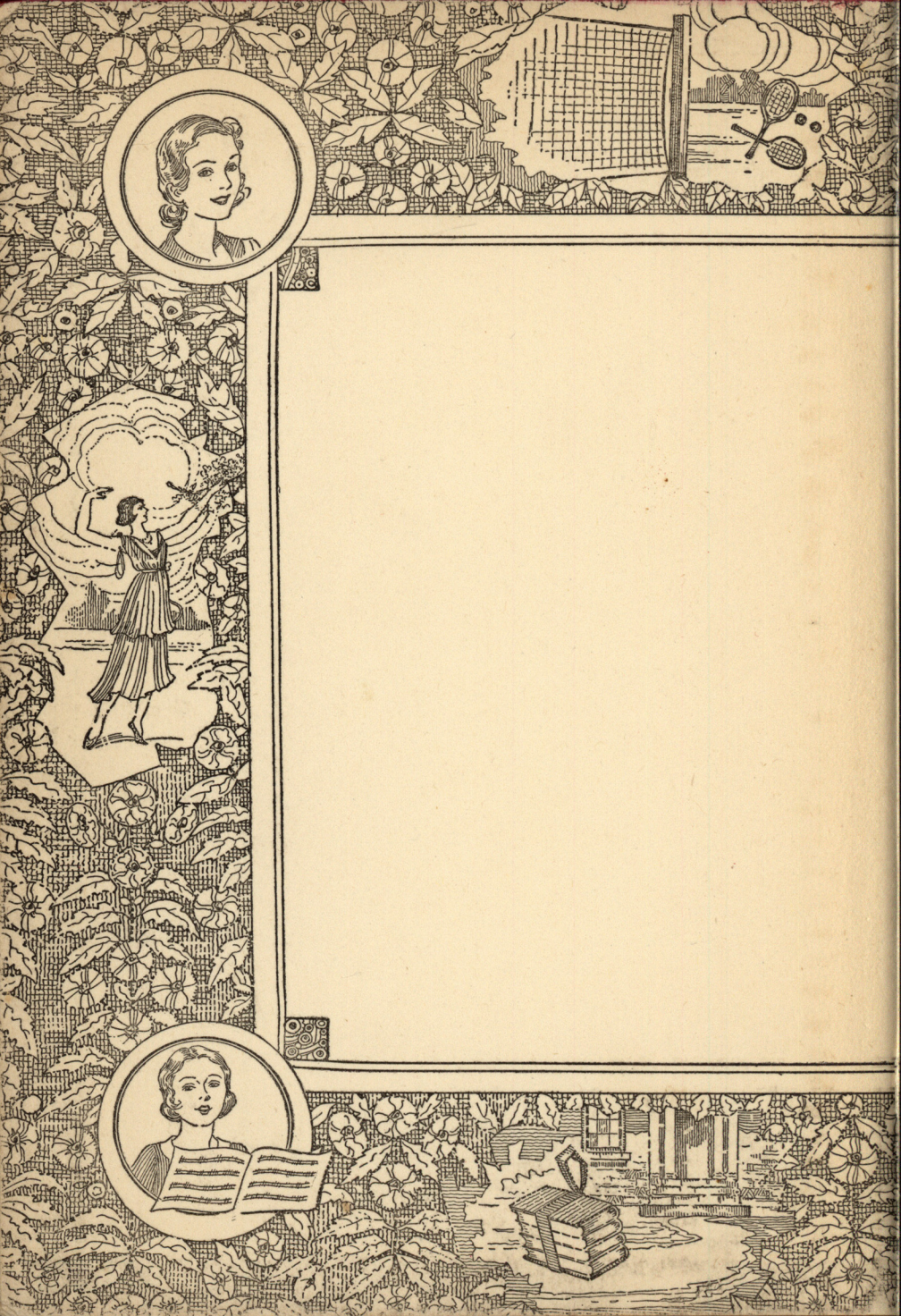
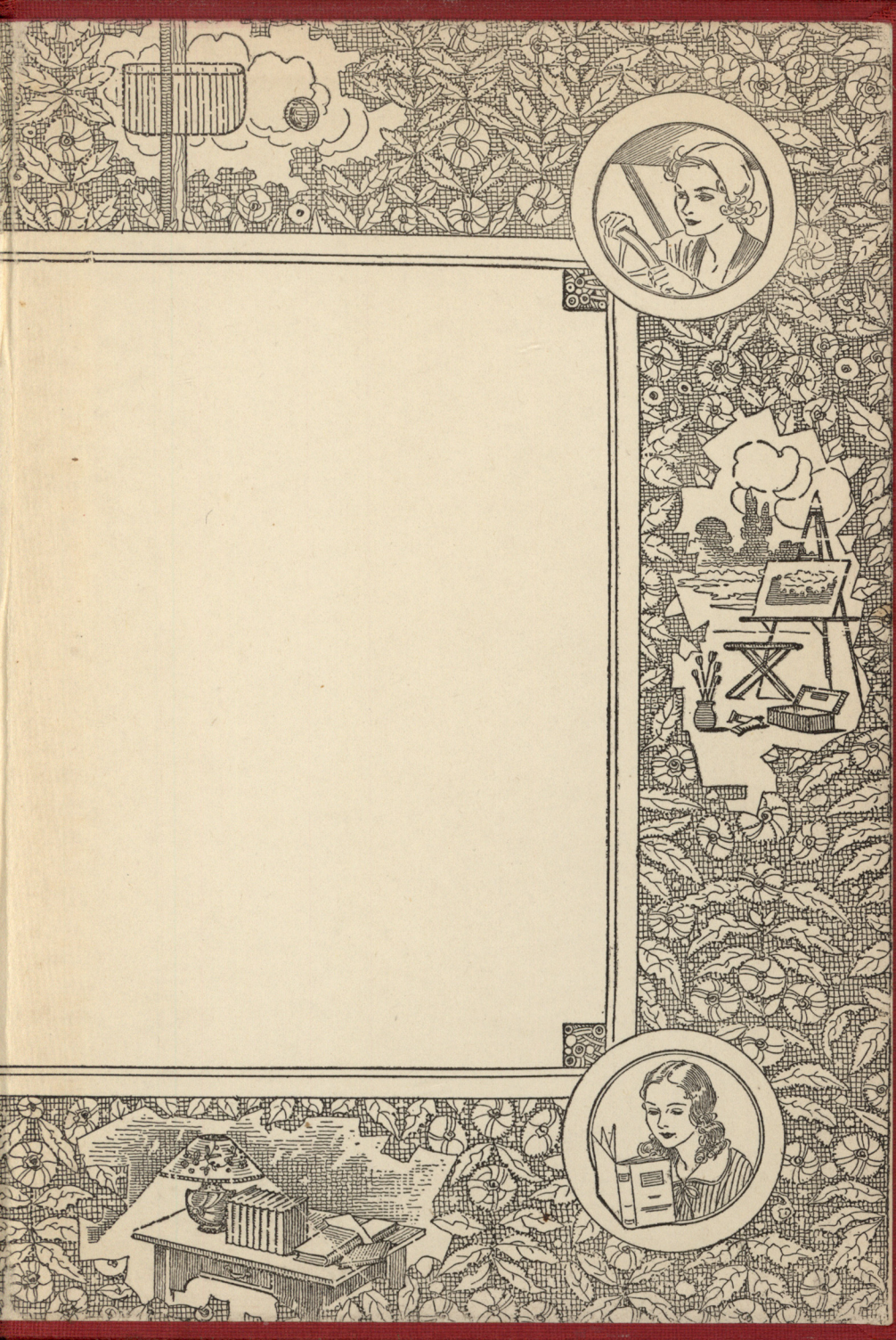
"How do you like Penny's story?" Mr. Parker inquired when Jerry had finished.

"It's the tops, Chief! Absolutely the tops!" The young reporter turned toward the girl. "Penny, let me congratulate you—just as one reporter to another."

"So you think I'm a reporter," Penny countered.

"Think it, I know it! You're a full-fledged news hawk!"

"You mean a hawkling," Penny replied to take some of the edge from his praise.

But just the same, she was secretly elated because she knew the young man was not given to flattery. With him the words of his mouth and the meditations of his heart were identical. And Jerry Livingston had stamped her as a good reporter. That was the best reward of all!

THE END